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## PRELUDE TO VICTORY





NIVELLE

# PRELUDE TO VICTORY

By

Brigadier-General

E. L. SPEARS

C.B., C.B.E., M.C.

*With an Introduction by*

The Rt. Hon.

WINSTON S. CHURCHILL

P.C., M.P.



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## INTRODUCTION

BY THE RT. HON. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, P.C., M.P. ~

READERS of *Liaison 1914* will welcome the appearance of another volume of the same quality and style by the same author. General Spears has devoted an entire volume to the description and analysis of the great offensive of 1917 which was planned by General Nivelle, and which ranks with the opening 'Battle of the Frontiers' as the most serious disaster sustained by the French in the Great War.

From his position as a Liaison Officer in constant contact with the Chiefs of Corps, Armies and Groups of Armies, he had the opportunity of knowing much that passed behind the lines as well as at the front. His perfect knowledge of French and close association with the French Command, added to his own experience and powers of observation and reflection, have enabled him to tell the story in its fullness. He shows the sufferings and heroism of the troops; the trials, controversies and intrigues of the generals; the inevitable difficulties and misunderstandings which arise between the most loyal allies; and finally the relation of the High Commanders with the politicians of both countries, and the political background upon which the fearful action of war so largely depends. All these aspects are woven together in *Prelude to Victory* to form a military and human study of the highest value and interest.

General Spears's pages are adorned or darkened by episodes and passages of humour, pathos and more often tragedy. It is impossible to read his account of the return of the French population and troops to the conquered areas, which were relinquished and devastated by the Germans in their strategic retreat in the spring of 1917, without being profoundly moved by his masterly and sensitive style and by the poignancy of the facts.

In these pages all is made plain, and the lay reader is not baffled by technical language. We see the whole drama as it unfolds from its first conception to its melancholy end. The relation of events to one another and the interplay of the personalities, military and political, far transcend the limits of an ordinary military work. It is this combination which gives its outstanding characteristic to this most attractive and thoughtful book.

General Spears naturally writes from the standpoint of one who saw at close quarters the difficulties and the friction between the generals and the ministers of France and Great Britain. His sympathies are evidently with the soldiers. If he fails in any respect, it is in not doing justice to the statesmen and in particular to Mr. Lloyd George, then at the anxious beginning of his memorable ministry. And upon these points a word of balancing correction is needed.

At the beginning of 1917 two tremendous events dominated and transformed all the conditions of the Great War. Russia fell out, and the United States came in. In these days I had constant access to the Prime Minister and never ceased, by personal intercourse and by speech in secret session, to dissuade him and the Government from a renewal on a great scale of the kind of offensive which had been so constant in 1916. The means for a successful offensive in 1917 did not exist. The preponderant Allied forces were not sufficient for a decisive success on the Western Front. The artillery was not numerous enough to enable several great attacks to be mounted at once, thus enabling the element of surprise to play its part. The tanks, which were to play a decisive part in 1918, had only appeared in small numbers, and their use was not comprehended either by the British or French High Command. On the other hand enormous additions to the Allied artillery were in operation and a great construction of tanks was on the way. Finally the arrival of the American armies—numbered by the million—was confidently expected for the campaign of 1918.

It seemed therefore wise to mark time on the Western Front during 1917 and, while keeping the enemy in a constant state of apprehension, not to run the risks and incur the losses of gigantic offensives. It is not easy to adopt such a policy; but it was certainly the right one.

Mr. Lloyd George and several of his colleagues held this general view of preventing vain slaughters on the Western Front before the arrival of the American armies, and he looked for an operation in the Italian theatre which might be fruitful, which would fill in the time, and which would definitely be minor. When these proposals were pulled to pieces by the military experts, intent upon their own plans, he found himself much cast down. At this moment when he was returning from Italy, he was joined by General Nivelle, who with his extraordinary, overpowering confidence, and personal address

argued that an offensive on the Western Front was easy and should be successful. Nivelle particularly insisted that it should be made with French troops, the British being only supplementary. Undoubtedly he captivated the Prime Minister and as this was to be in the main a French enterprise, it was not easy to see how British Ministers could take sides against him. In all the circumstances, and as the new French Commander-in-Chief was resolved, it seemed right to give him all possible support. To that extent the British War Cabinet undoubtedly became the advocates of General Nivelle's plan. They certainly would never have approved such a plan if it had not been presented to them so vigorously by an ally. It would have been better if they had resisted more strongly beforehand, but once a decision has been taken in war, it becomes a duty, especially among those who like it least, to give it every possible chance.

Generals are not always right, and politicians are not always timid and weak. On many occasions during the War the military men were proved to be wrong, and the strategy of statesmen proved to be right.

But these observations, which are necessary to the completeness of General Spears's book, in no way detract from its merit and distinction. It is one of the best books which have been written about the Great War. It has a particular bearing upon present events. It should be read with attention by every officer of field rank and upwards in the French and British Armies. It will reveal to them a hundred mistakes and honest shortcomings which could be avoided in the light of experience already so dearly bought. It should also be read by the widest public as a record of wonderful exertions and glorious sacrifices, ending after tribulation in victory.



## PREFACE

In my book *Liaison*, 1914, I gave an eye-witness account of the war of movement, when the ebb of defeat swept the Allied armies back from Belgium, and the flow of victory carried them forward from the Marne to the Aisne.

In this volume I tell of events with which I was still concerned as a liaison officer, but the theme is very different. The armics are now sunk in mud. Periodically they make a gigantic effort to shake themselves free of their barbed-wire shackles, but in vain.

Some may wonder why, having previously written of 1914, I should now be concerned with 1917. The explanation of this gap of two and a half years is that, not having much time for writing, I have had to be severely selective. My reasons for choosing this particular period are that it was a very important one from both the military and the political points of view, and that it contains lessons which the present generation should understand and posterity remember. It was also a period in which the relations between the British and French Armies were put to their greatest strain. The reasons and causes of this ought to be studied so that they can be avoided if similar circumstances arise again. I hope at some future date to write a sequel which will conclude my story of this part of the war.

It is my hope that this personal narrative may contribute to a better understanding of days when it seemed as if the only constant factor, the one thing that could be relied upon absolutely, was the unfailing endurance and courage of both French and British soldiers. That courage and that endurance, on the part of men who, day by day and night by night, held the line and fought as they were bidden, grousing perhaps but faithful unto death, is beyond description as it is almost beyond understanding.

E. L. SPEARS.

I wish to express my profound thanks to Rupert Hart-Davis for the minute care with which he revised my proofs. The maps, drawn by Colonel Shears, the Border Regiment, are themselves proof of the debt I owe him.

E. L. S.



*This Book is dedicated to  
The XI Hussars*





## CHAPTER I

### THE DOWNFALL OF JOFFRE

WHEN 1917 opened, the opposing groups of nations, like two teams in a tug of war, were gathering their strength for what they hoped would be the last great effort; but unlike the teams in such a contest there was a thick veil between them. There were rumours, generally very misleading, of how the other side was shaping, but they could not see each other, they could only feel the tension of the rope. The teams were made up of different nations, and the resistance of each varied. It was doubtful whether, even though the efforts of some could be maintained, all the participants would hold out to the bitter end.

The first great excitement of war had long since worn off, swallowed up in the mud of the trenches, torn to ribbons on barbed-wire entanglements. Every nation was acutely aware of its own misery and of its losses; none was greatly impressed by the efficiency of its partners, nor particularly confident in the sincerity of their efforts or even in their loyalty.

Amongst the Allies, the difficulties of parliamentary government in war-time were becoming more apparent every day. The old coat of democracy, never intended for wear at Armageddon, was showing white at the seams.

In England, it was true, Parliament was docile enough; there the weakness seemed to reside more in the intrigues of leading politicians, or, what amounts to the same thing, the struggles between them. Each was convinced that he held the key to victory and that his personal success must bring the war a step nearer to a triumphant end.

But in France Parliament was the difficulty. *L'Union Sacrée* weighed heavily on some shoulders. The Sacred Union was all very well, but what of the sacred rights of the people's representatives? No towering figure dominated the debates in the Chamber. Governments changed every few months, while at the Palace of the Elysée President Poincaré tried to keep the peace between Ministers, granted interviews, and sighed as he scratched the head of his cat Gris-Gris, thinking how much more intelligent the little Siamese was than most

of the men with whom he came in contact. His Prime Minister now was Briand, brilliant, subtle, incredibly quick at understanding a situation he heard debated, if he happened to listen to what was being said, but who seldom read official dispatches, and thus frequently took the opposite view in the Cabinet to that set forth in a letter he had signed the day before.

Then there was the Press. Clemenceau led the attacks on the Government in his paper *L'Homme Enchaîné*, the successor to *L'Homme Libre*. Daily he thundered criticism, and his example was followed by a host of others. Day by day his leader appeared as a blank. The censor had blocked it out. A gaping public stared at the white space and wondered what truths a fearful Government had prevented the formidable old man from uttering.

The French politicians were not satisfied with the way in which the war was being conducted by the soldiers. The losses had been appalling, yet victory seemed as far off as ever.

In truth the war effort of France had been extraordinary: 1,294,000 killed or taken prisoner, her most productive provinces in enemy occupation, many of her coal-mines a battlefield. With immense courage and infinite labour she had carried the main burden of the war until her unprepared allies were ready to make their weight felt.

Russia, like an eiderdown and with about as much sense, was continually being pushed back, losing a cloud of feathers, and then, somewhat deflated, rolling forward again. Deaf to the remonstrances of the Western Powers, she had recently allowed Roumania, with its vast resources in wheat and oil, to be routed by Mackensen and Falkenhayn.

Italy — well, Italy was Italy. Not doing so badly, the French considered, bearing in mind the conditions under which she entered the war and the attitude of her population, but she required watching.

As for England, who, had she been somewhat better prepared, might have won the war long since, she seemed in French eyes to be extraordinarily slow in getting under way. Even her industry was unbelievably lethargic in adapting itself to war-production. Moreover the spirit of whole sections of her population appeared odd to the French, who are constitutionally incapable of understanding the slow processes of the English people.

Were the British people really *in* the war, the French asked them-

selves. They knew how their own people had fought, all too ungrudging of the cost of human lives. The Marne, Ypres, the Yser, Artois, Champagne, Artois again, Verdun, a wound which had turned into a running sore; then the Somme, where the British had at last put up a real army and fought hard. (The French never understood the stupendous efforts of the British at Ypres.) But the Somme was not a word to conjure with either in France or England. Politicians in both countries, and the people followed suit, were very critical of that terrific struggle for which commanders had so little to show. None knew, neither the generals who led nor the statesmen who criticized, what a blow had been dealt the enemy on that ravaged and bloody field.

There was *malaise* on both sides of the Channel. In England conscription was pressing into service those whose enthusiasm for the war had not quite sufficed to induce them to participate in it.

Asquith had gone. Lloyd George had taken his place, while Northcliffe, the Clemenceau of England as far as the Press was concerned, barked at his heels.

Lloyd George, like the French politicians, loathed the Somme. His gorge rose at the massacre. His quick, impatient mind revolted when he was told there was no other way to win the war but this bloody bludgeoning. 'Blood and mud,' he used to say: 'blood and mud, they can think of nothing better.' He clamoured for new methods, for a strategy that would find a way round the impenetrable wall of the German trenches. The soldiers found none, and discouraged the ideas he put forward.

The differences between soldiers and politicians were acute. They could agree on nothing, with the result that the voice of England at the council tables of the Alliance, which should have grown with the increasing weight of her responsibilities, was weak and uncertain and generally overruled by that of France, who, on the whole, managed to speak with one voice when dealing with her allies.

The British soldiers held steadily to the thesis that France was the main theatre of war, and that the maximum of strength should therefore be concentrated and maintained there. What would victories in distant fields avail us, they asked, if we courted disaster in the main one?

Furthermore France was near at hand, close to the sources of supply, and this was certainly not true of the Alpine or Mediterranean objectives so dear to Ministers. Moreover the soldiers

reiterated with exasperating monotony that the Germans, being on interior lines, could meet us at any point we might select to attack more quickly and easily than we could ourselves supply that point. By which they meant that the Germans were, so to speak, sitting in the centre of a wheel down whose spokes they could slide in every direction, while all we could do was to run round the rim.

This line of argument did not appeal to Mr. Lloyd George, who contended that the best way to bring down the power of Germany was to knock out the allies who supported her. At the moment he favoured an expedition to Palestine.

Now there was quite a lot to be said for and against this idea, and the soldiers began at once their tiresome calculations of time, seasonal conditions, shipping, railways, munitions, and so on. They said that these expeditions had a way of absorbing endless numbers of men, but even they never guessed that this campaign would, before the war was over, involve 1,192,000 men. Their arguments seemed to them conclusive, but they did not prevail against Mr. Lloyd George, whose reasons were thought at the time to be largely based on the fact that the capture of Jerusalem would please the Welsh.

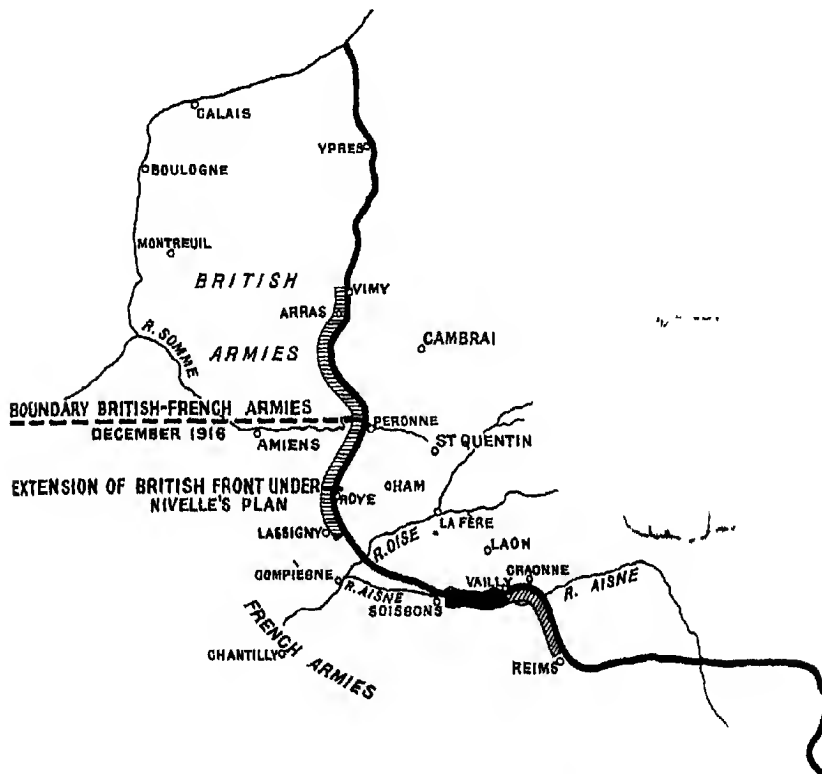
The idea of taking on fresh commitments exasperated the soldiers. The War Office had four main theatres to supervise besides the principal one in France. At one time there were nine all told. Salonika was the worst. It had every disadvantage: it was mainly French, and the Commander-in-Chief, General Sarraïl, was the *bête noire* of all soldiers, British and French alike.

The military policy to be followed in 1917 had been settled at a great Inter-Allied Conference held at Chantilly on November 15th, 1916. General Joffre presided, and Sir Douglas Haig and Sir William Robertson represented the British Army.

The principle governing its decisions was that the operations should be of a decisive character. Although the straits to which the German Army had been reduced by the Battle of the Somme were not fully appreciated, the Allied Commanders believed that the process of disintegration had set in on the enemy's side, and that everything depended upon keeping up the pressure. This was to be increased by attacks with the maximum available strength on all the Allied fronts, to pin the enemy to his positions and deprive him of the possibility of reinforcing one theatre at the expense of



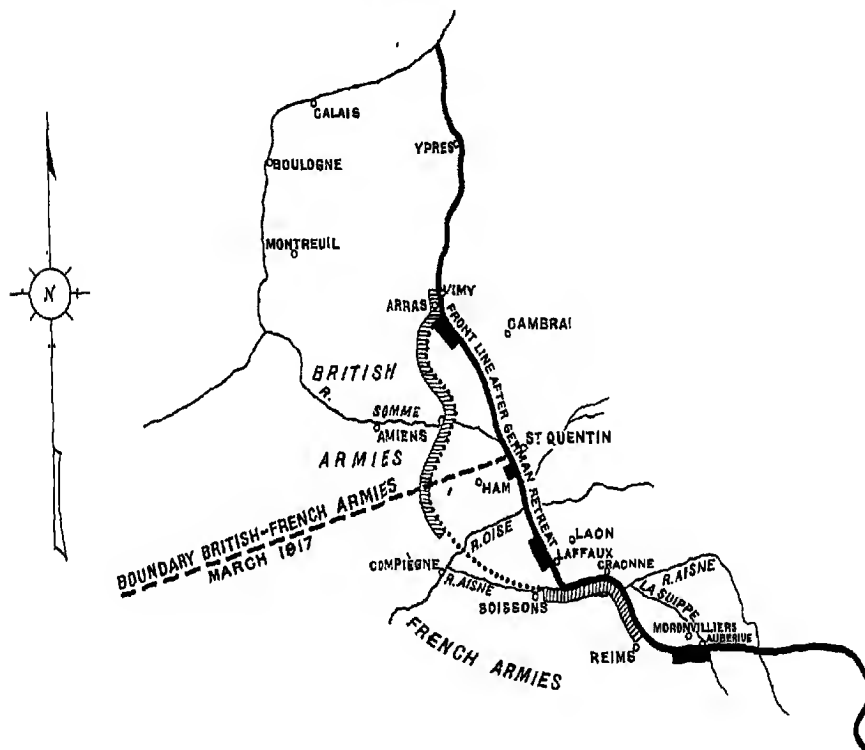
# JOFFRE'S PLAN



**FRONT OF ATTACKS PRESCRIBED BY GENERAL JOFFRE IN DECEMBER 1916.** THE ATTACK ON THE AISNE TO TAKE PLACE 15 DAYS AFTER THE BRITISH ATTACKS BETWEEN VIMY AND THE SOMME AND THE FRENCH ATTACKS BETWEEN THE SOMME AND LASSIGNY WHICH WERE TIMED FOR THE 1<sup>ST</sup> FEBRUARY 1917.

**FRONT OF ATTACK ADDED BY GENERAL NIVELLE IN JANUARY 1917.** UNDER HIS PLAN THE BRITISH FRONT WAS EXTENDED TO JUST NORTH OF ROYE.

# THE NIVELLE PLAN



FRONT OF ATTACKS PRESCRIBED BY GENERAL NIVELLE BEFORE THE GERMAN RETREAT.

FRONT OF ATTACKS ADDED IN FRONT OF MORDONVILLIERS, LAFFAUX AND ST QUENTIN AFTER THE 15<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 1917. THE BRITISH ATTACK AT ARRAS WAS TO PRECEDE THE FRENCH MAIN ATTACK BY 4 DAYS.





another. To<sup>1</sup> prevent the enemy himself from assuming the offensive, these combined attacks were to take place during the first fortnight in February, and no operation in any theatre was to be delayed for more than three weeks beyond the initial date finally decided upon.

The military representatives of all the Entente countries made it clear at the conference that the Anglo-French front in France and Belgium was the main theatre of the Allied operations, and both the English and French generals, each with an eye on their respective political chiefs, obtained a declaration that the forces allotted to that front should not be drawn upon for other theatres. 'These should, in our opinion, be the paramount premises on which every plan of operations for the Coalition should be based'. These decisions were eventually ratified by the Entente governments.

Sir Douglas Haig and General Joffre also settled between them that the Franco-British pressure should be maintained during the winter, and that the British should assume the main weight of the attack to be launched in the spring.

This was not only fair, it was necessary. Joffre had warned his Government that to place undue strain on the French Army would be to court danger. It had been exhausted by the long-drawn-out struggle at Verdun. The British generals did not require to be told this, they knew it, but the French Cabinet did not receive the advice well.

According to leading German authorities, the Allied decision not to relax pressure on the enemy was the right one for the campaign of 1917, notwithstanding the apparent meagreness of the results obtained from the same policy in 1916. Hindenburg, Ludendorff and Tirpitz have said that the autumn of 1916 was the most critical period of the war for the Germans until the summer of 1918. According to these ex-enemy leaders, wisdom demanded continuous hammering at the weakening vital spot rather than playing the German game by pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp of easy success in other theatres of war, thus giving the enemy the breathing space he so badly needed.

The plan for the Franco-British offensive decided upon by General Joffre and agreed to by Sir Douglas Haig<sup>1</sup> aimed at 'pinching out' the Germans both from the salient formed by the old Somme positions and from the far bigger one formed by the angle of the German

<sup>1</sup> See Maps facing pages 29 and 560

line where it left the Aisne near Soissons to run north-westwards.

The British were to deal with the northern salient, the Fourth and Fifth Armies attacking its southern side while the Third Army attacked it on the northern. The First Army was to secure the Vimy Ridge, thereby covering the Third Army as it debouched and protecting it against a German attack from the north.

At the same time the Northern Group of French Armies (the G.A.N.)<sup>1</sup> was to advance between the Somme and the Oise, or more accurately between the Somme and Lassigny. The preparations for these attacks were to be pressed on so that they could take place on February 1st. Together they would serve to threaten from the north the bigger salient formed by the angle of the German defences. This salient would in its turn be pushed in by a secondary French attack on the Aisne front a fortnight later. This attack was to be carried out by the French Fifth Army which formed part of the Group of Armies of the Centre (the G.A.C.).<sup>2</sup>

General Joffre was in fact planning another Battle of the Somme, that is an action methodically developed stage by stage, but on a wider front, with incomparably more powerful material and at a far more rapid tempo.

The formidable bastion of hills and forests at the apex of the German line, together with the forbidding ridge of the Chemin des Dames, was not to be attacked frontally, but was to fall under the double threat of an attack first from the north then from the south-east.

The British were to attack later in the year in Flanders, for the British War Cabinet attached the greatest importance to diminishing the submarine menace by driving the enemy from the Belgian coast.

Such, in brief outline, was the plan. As far as the first part of it was concerned, it was essentially simple and well calculated to deal the enemy a staggering blow. But to put it into successful execution speed was essential to prevent the enemy's having time to escape before the attack was launched; and my narrative will show how this essential factor of success was thrown away.

Much else was thrown away also, many opportunities and thousands upon thousands of lives, during the disastrous phase of intrigue and muddle upon which the war was now about to enter.

By the beginning of 1917, the French Government, long determined to get rid of General Joffre, had at last superseded him and

<sup>1</sup> Groupe des Armées du Nord.

<sup>2</sup> Groupe des Armées du Centre.

appointed a successor. His days as Commander-in-Chief were already numbered when he presided at the Conference of Chantilly. On December 12th, 1916, although retaining the nominal title of Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies on all fronts, he was replaced in effective command by General Nivelle.

The story of Joffre's downfall stretches back for a considerable time. Its main cause was a growing jealousy on the part of parliamentarians of an authority which, unlike that of a government, escaped their scrutiny and control. Joffre towered above the whole nation and dominated the war from the Allied side; foreign powers heeded his opinions, and generally conformed to his directions. This was too big a man for democracy, which, tolerant of human weakness amongst its own creatures provided they do not rise too high, indulgent to corruption provided it is not too blatant, found in Joffre a soldier surrounded by a most vigilant guard in the shape of his Staff, armed with a kind of voodoo called military secrecy and expediency, warning off both curiosity and criticism, against whom blandishments and frowns were equally unavailing.

The Grand Quartier Général<sup>1</sup> had become omnipotent, a state within a state; it had gradually acquired powers which gave it not only practically absolute control over that large slice of national territory occupied by the armies, but in a thousand ways immense authority in many other spheres as well. As it grew in power so it grew in size, but the innumerable additions to its sections and departments did not necessarily equip it with technical ability to administer in spheres where, before the war, staff officers had not penetrated. The medical and administrative sides of the army were defective, and the Ministry of War, having no control in the army zone, disclaimed responsibility. There were serious shortcomings from which the army suffered, and of which both regimental officers and men complained. These came to the ears of Parliament by many channels, but neither Parliament as a body nor Deputies as individuals were able to make any impression on the arrogant and self-sufficient military machine.

Criticism was not confined to administration. The dissatisfaction in political circles over the results of the Somme has been alluded to, and the growing volume of feeling against the Higher Command was voiced in the secret sessions of the Chamber and Senate during the summer of 1916. A member of the Army Committee declared at the

<sup>1</sup> French General Headquarters.

tribune that the Higher Command exercised absolute power such as had never been known in France, and went on to accuse it of having wasted the best of the French Army in useless attacks.

The seemingly endless duration of the war also told against Joffre. Why did he allow the weary months to slip by without throwing the enemy back, without regaining some of the national territory? All that seemed to be happening was that, periodically, the army, as if in a spasm, threw itself on the German defences, only to fall back injured and bleeding.

Joffre had made an unfortunate *mot*. He had said he was 'nibbling' at the German line. Nibbling indeed! How much nibbling would it take to eat through the German wire? The phrase sounded like the echo of a tale of one of those endless and hopeless tasks the gods imposed on men in the days of ancient Greece.

All these factors combined to make the assaults on Joffre's autocratic powers successful. Millerand, the Minister for War who had defended him through thick and thin, was no longer in office. His successor, General Galli  ni, with whom Joffre had quarrelled bitterly,<sup>1</sup> had been replaced on March 17th, 1916 by General Roques, but Galli  ni, before his failing health forced him to resign, had been compelled by the Chamber, perhaps not unwillingly in view of his own relations with the Commander-in-Chief, to strike a blow at Joffre's supremacy by re-establishing parliamentary commissions of control in the army.

But there was another matter that contributed to General Joffre's downfall, perhaps more than is generally realized. This was the question of General Sarrail's position in Salonika.

General Sarrail was from the beginning to the end of his career a disturbing element in the French body politic. He had a strong backing amongst Senators and Deputies of the Left, and his alleged power with these politicians made it difficult if not impossible for the military machine to assimilate him. Although he had exercised the command of an Army with distinction during the Marne, General Joffre relieved him of his command, and the Government was in

<sup>1</sup> The cause of this quarrel was a dispute between Joffre and Galli  ni as to the respective prerogatives of the Commander-in-Chief and the Minister for War. It eventually led Galli  ni, who was in failing health, to resign because he was unable to obtain the dismissal of Joffre. The emotional background of the differences between the two men may well have been the feelings aroused in both by the propaganda of Galli  ni's Staff, who asserted that Joffre had taken credit for the victory of the Marne which should have gone to Galli  ni. I am certain this was not true of Joffre himself, but it may have been true of some members of his Staff.

a fever to find a suitable niche for the powerful general before his perfervid political friends made trouble. The formation of the Salonika Army in the summer of 1915 afforded a heaven-sent opportunity to *caser* Sarrail, and he was accordingly given command of the Armée d'Orient. *Caser* in this case meant to provide him with a post which would keep him busy, flatter his backers, give opportunity to his undoubted military talent and, greatest advantage of all, though not so loudly proclaimed, put distance multiplied by difficulties of communications between him and the politicians of his colour.

General Joffre had not been consulted about this appointment,<sup>1</sup> the Salonika force at first not being under his command, but when in December 1915 it was placed under his orders the situation at once became complicated. It became acute when General Sarrail quarrelled with the commander of the French contingent, sent him home, and received General Joffre's emissaries very badly.

The Commander-in-Chief came to the conclusion that an inquiry on the spot was necessary, and he was encouraged in this view by the fact that the British Government was clamouring for one. He informed the French Cabinet that he intended sending General de Castelnau to carry it out. But the Cabinet feared the criticism that might follow; the Radical section of the Chamber might not tolerate the ultra-Catholic soldier reporting on their protégé. Yet something had to be done.

Finally Monsieur Briand, the Prime Minister of the day, decided to send out General Roques, the Minister for War. This decision was in itself a rebuff to General Joffre. He was no longer to have a free hand to deal with his subordinates as he thought fit. Moreover General Roques reported in favour of General Sarrail. This was a very serious blow to the Commander-in-Chief's prestige. It was the beginning of the end. He felt it himself.

There were certain signs amongst the Staff that the great man would soon fall. A military body, such as a Staff, is after all only an assembly of human beings, and the fact that it is composed of men who have all won their way by hard competition, who all have careers and ambitions, does not tend to attenuate the more obvious defects of human nature.

Although he made little sign, Joffre was conscious of the change. He felt it about him, just as he perceived a distinct cooling off amongst many politicians who had hitherto professed the most

<sup>1</sup> COLONEL FABRY, *Joffre et son Destin*, p. 131.

ardent admiration for him. Even his glory as Victor of the Marne, which at first had awed and silenced criticism, was now disputed. A hundred detractors nibbled at his fame.

So began a long Calvary for this simple, strong man who had tasted supreme power, had felt his capacity to rise to every occasion, and had come to regard the immense burden he carried as part of himself, something from which he could never be divorced.

His power of resistance to the politicians weakened as it always did when he felt he was not supported. Capable of clear, forceful expression when the atmosphere was friendly, he became awkwardly silent or even confused when he felt criticism or hostility in the air. If this happened in regard to military matters, he was wont to take refuge in stubborn, baffling silences, or to stick closely to the carefully prepared written text he had always with him. But now there was no text; these were not military matters; he was being assailed by something as violent and intangible as a high wind, the tornado of jealousy, ill-informed criticism and parliamentary intrigue. The anonymous beehive of politics was thoroughly roused. Joffre with a weary hand tried to brush the swarm aside for a while, but he soon realized it was a hopeless task.

In the secret sessions of the Chamber and Senate that took place during the first days of December 1916, there was no one with the strength, or perhaps the desire, to defend the Commander-in-Chief. The Government obtained the votes of confidence for which it had asked, but its majority was reduced. Monsieur Briand realized that something must be done, yet he was unwilling to sacrifice Joffre. Although as a general Joffre impressed him but little, he realized the enormous weight Joffre carried with the Allies, and the advantage this conferred on France, and indeed on the Alliance, which had in him a virtual Generalissimo. Briand also took into account Joffre's popularity with the Army. He saw that a compromise must be found, and his subtle brain soon devised one.

In the second week of December he found it necessary to reconstruct his Ministry. General Lyautey was appointed Minister for War, Admiral Lacaze, the Minister of Marine, acting for him until he was able to leave Morocco where he was Resident General. Unfortunately the new Government felt it incumbent upon it to take a series of important decisions before the arrival of General Lyautey. Joffre was moved to Paris, to be the technical adviser to the Government, with the title of Commander-in-Chief. This was Briand's

solution of the crisis. The French Armies in France were to be commanded by General Nivelle, who would, like Sarrail at Salonika, exercise command under Joffre's personal supervision. Generals Mangin and Guillaumat were given Armies, and General de Castelnau was sent on a mission to Russia. Foch, on Joffre's advice, was relieved of his command.

All these measures, taken in his absence, upset and angered Lyautey when he was told of them, and in particular he would not accept the appointment of General Joffre as technical adviser to the Government, since in his view this was the rôle of the Minister for War himself. He refused to join the Government if this plan was persisted in. Rather than face yet another crisis Monsieur Briand gave way, and on December 26th General Joffre was asked to retire with the rank of Marshal of France, which he consented to do.

General Joffre had himself suggested Nivelle as his successor in command of the French Armies on the Western Front. It is not difficult to understand his reasons for doing so. He knew Nivelle was inexperienced in great commands, but he had been brilliantly successful as an Army Commander; Joffre believed him to be loyal and thought that he could count on his respect. These were ideal qualities upon which to base their future relationship. Nivelle's deference would obviate friction, and his very inexperience would make him depend upon the one man who could best make good his deficiencies. Nivelle had dash and imagination; his success had been undoubted; Joffre would see to it that his lack of previous experience of high command did not lead to any serious mistakes.

I do not know whether the glamour of Nivelle's name exercised any influence upon Joffre, but it may well have been that, sick at heart and rather weary, he hoped that the luck of the younger man, his dash and confidence, might, in combination with his own riper genius, add new lustre to his waning fortunes. These were in any case legitimate calculations, and Joffre was fully entitled to think that the best solution for himself was also best for the country. That he was incapable of selfish calculation was proved by his long self-effacement and his unbroken silence once he had accepted the sacrifice demanded of him in giving up his post as Commander-in-Chief.

Thus a great figure passed from the limelight of the world into obscurity and silence. The man who had commanded two and a quarter million men with a staff of four hundred and fifty



was now reduced to an establishment of three. Only one man on the Staff at Chantilly, his orderly officer, volunteered to form part of the little band that accompanied him. On his way from Chantilly to the capital, a car carrying the pennon of the Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies passed him travelling at great speed; in it sat General Nivelle.

There was some reluctance to provide Joffre with a suitable office in Paris, and considerable difficulty in finding him one. Few indeed were the visitors who came to call on him there, although with the utmost punctuality he arrived every morning carrying under his arm the famous leather folder, which never contained anything but a newspaper. Nor were there many people to distract his attention while he sat at his desk for hours, often playing mechanically with the fountain pen which had signed orders that had altered the fate of the world: it also had been famous in its day, for all at Chantilly had known that the one certain way of provoking the Commander-in-Chief's wrath was to touch it.



JOFRE



## CHAPTER II

### THE NIVELLE PLAN

THE new Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies was a gunner. He was good-looking, smart, plausible and cool. Typically French in appearance, he showed no sign of his mother's English blood. He was a man of medium height, judged by our standards, with regular well-drawn features, thoughtful brown eyes, a slightly greying well-brushed moustache, dark hair showing white at the temples, and a *mouche* or tuft of hair, also turned grey, under the lower lip. He gave an impression of vigour, strength and energy.

His career had been brilliant, for he was a mere colonel at the beginning of the war. From the first he distinguished himself; at the Battle of the Aisne he brought his guns forward almost into the front line, re-establishing the situation at a dangerous point. He had imagination and courage and rose rapidly. By May 1916, he was commanding the Army of Verdun under General Pétain, the Commander of the Central Group of Armies. It was while he held this command that he elaborated a system of attack which proved singularly successful and which a growing number of officers, especially those on the Staff, thought irresistible.<sup>1</sup>

What remained to be seen was whether the glorified raids of Verdun (for in the last analysis his successful operations before the fortress could only be so described) were applicable on a larger scale, and if the untried leader had the balance, poise, and vision to stand alone without the sure and firm hand of a Pétain or a Joffre to guide him; above all whether he was strong enough to keep his head on the lonely and dizzy heights of supreme command. Would the shadowy and enigmatic figure of France standing behind him, scrutinizing his every gesture, cause him to look over his shoulder at her rather than at the enemy on his front?

One thing everyone in the army knew about Nivelle, and that was that he had the dashing soul of a cavalryman. Always fond of horses and a good rider, he could beat younger men across country. Thus the French and British Armies were now both commanded by

<sup>1</sup> We now know that in October-December 1916 the Germans only had 'tired' divisions at Verdun, all the others having gone to the Somme.

men who were essentially horse-soldiers; but the Frenchman, although not technically a cavalryman, was probably far more typical of that arm than his more prudent Scottish counterpart, Sir Douglas Haig.

The story of Nivelle's arrival to take over the command at Chantilly is characteristic of his tact and naturally chivalrous instincts.

The senior officer at the G.Q.G. when he arrived was his ex-chief, General de Castelnau. The new Commander-in-Chief was shown into the room where the elder man awaited him. General de Castelnau stood up behind his desk. General Nivelle drew himself up at the door, and, as an inferior in rank speaking to a superior, said '*Bonjour, mon Général*'; General de Castelnau accepted this token of deference from his late subordinate. '*Bonjour, Nivelle*', he answered; then, as adroit as the younger man, showing that while appreciating the gesture he accepted the new position, he added as he advanced with outstretched hands; '*Bonjour, mon Général.*'

This little scene, infinitely subtle, does honour to both participants; they proved equal to a difficult situation and dealt with it like the well-bred gentlemen they were.

Joffre's choice of Nivelle as his successor was heartily approved by the politicians. Not only had the Government been impressed by his success, but those Ministers who had visited him in his command at Verdun had formed the most favourable opinion of his personality. He had struck them as cool, decided and completely sure of both himself and his method. Indeed in this impression they were right: on December 15th he took leave of his Army, which had just achieved a further considerable success at the fort of Vaux, in words which showed that he was certainly not lacking in self-confidence. 'The experiment has been conclusive. Our method has been tried out. I can assure you that victory is certain. The enemy will learn this to his cost.'

There was, however, at least one French Minister who did not share the general enthusiasm for Nivelle and his method. This was Monsieur Painlevé. When Monsieur Briand reconstituted his Government on December 12th, Painlevé refused to remain in it, mainly because the changes in the Higher Command and the projected new methods did not appeal to him.

The dismissal of Joffre had echoes in England. Interested



FAYOLLE



CASTELNAU



observers noted that great soldiers were not sacrosanct, and that Ministers could dismiss them without shattering public confidence and above all without bringing about their own downfall. In those days Mr. Lloyd George was at no pains to disguise his dissatisfaction with the leadership of Sir Douglas Haig; he criticized with asperity the Chantilly plan, that product of the cogitations of a fallen leader and of one whose fall was desired. He informed his military advisers that it savoured far too much of the Somme to appeal to him.

This attitude thoroughly alarmed the General Staff; they pointed out that the Chantilly plan had been accepted by all the Governments concerned, including the British, and that it formed the essential basis for the plans of all the Allies in the spring offensive. Ministers were told bluntly that if they intended changing their minds they should say so at once, as the other Allied Governments ought to be informed without delay.

The spearhead of the opposition to Mr. Lloyd George's ideas was Sir William Robertson, the C.I.G.S.<sup>1</sup> Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief, was in France; moreover that courteous, handsome and obstinate soldier was singularly tongue-tied, and could only give an *ex parte* point of view in favour of his own theatre of operations. It was left to Robertson to face the array of politicians in Downing Street. On the surface at least he was exceedingly ill-equipped for his task. Inarticulate, save in so far as there was quite a variety of notes in the series of deep grunts he was wont to utter, he would, had he been left to his own resources, have been unintelligible on paper also, for only a very few experts could decipher his handwriting. But he was formidable. To some at least of his subordinates an overwhelming personality, this ex-private of Dragoons contained in his cylindrical person a quite unusual proportion of character and common sense to the cubic inch. He was a master of his profession and an indefatigable worker, but very intolerant of the natural ignorance on strategic questions of those who did not possess the elements of military science.

Arrogant, aitchless when excited, and flat-footed (both figuratively and physically), he lurched down Whitehall, an ambulating refrigerator. Daily he froze the blossoming fancies of amateur strategists, and with his deep gruff voice punctured visions of the most attractive side-shows. When he was told by politicians that they were given to understand that this or the other expedition would

<sup>1</sup> Chief of the Imperial General Staff.



bring the war to a speedy and victorious end: 'I've 'eard different,' he would say, and that was all that could be got out of him.

Politeness and indulgence were certainly not to be counted amongst his many qualities: *savoir faire* was something he could never have understood even had he been able to grasp the sense of the French words which, because they were French, he would in any case have distrusted, disliked and despised. It would have been as easy to make one of Henry VIII's yeomen armed with a quarterstaff understand the meaning of tact as to make him realize that a little mansuetude and affability would have helped him mightily in his difficult and most responsible task. His dislike of politicians was inveterate, and I sometimes thought he must have had an inner suspicion that, whatever their name and appearance, in each one lurked, concealed and wily, a Lloyd George. So strong had grown his distrust of the Prime Minister, and by implication of those connected with him, that he could hardly mention a Minister without showing impatience. When speaking of one he generally closed the sentence by making the gesture of a governess rapping the knuckles of a child fiddling with things on the table. The fact was that, unpractised in the art of speech, he suffered hidden tortures when faced with the subtle reasoning, the convincing metaphors and the flow of eloquence with which politicians urged upon him schemes and policies which his head told him were fallacious and his stout heart bade him oppose to the last. But when his tongue refused to formulate the adequate and final argument, he would fall back upon a surly silence, exasperating to the lay mind, and rely upon the written answer, covering many pages carefully scrawled over in an illegible handwriting and disfigured by frequent erasures; but when a perspiring and shaking clerk did finally produce the typed pages, they were always a monument of common sense and foresight, a document which in almost every case will stand the cold light of after-knowledge.

For 'Wully', as the army called him, was a great man, probably the best and finest soldier we produced in the war. He was lovable too, lovable for his unquenchable moral courage, and for his queer saturnine humour, which was manifested at unexpected moments, the remark prefaced by a wry smile and sometimes followed by a laugh that began as a silent convulsion and ended in a harsh Ha! Ha! Such demonstrations never took place when he was concentrating or busy, which means they were rare, nor were they to be

expected at breakfast-time or when his creature comforts were interfered with. I frequently trembled lest the food were not of the proper English kind, the carriage not properly warmed, or the bottle of whisky not forthcoming on the special French train I had often in later days to order for him. When a misfortune of this sort occurred his chin would go into his collar, a second chin would appear under it, his eyes would go dark, his whole face assume a quite terrifying wooden aspect, while the hand tucked into the Sam Browne belt flapped gently like a fin. And then out came the grunt, like a cork out of a bottle, releasing the flow of words, the 'telling off' which he generally shot at you without turning his head as he strode by. No, he was not always easy to deal with. His manners were not good either. He had a way of slamming the door in your face while you were still speaking that endangered your nose and was disconcerting in the extreme; when this happened it almost made you feel there was something to be said for Mr. Lloyd George's opinion of him. But his strength and his truth won him love and respect, and his own loyalty commanded loyalty in return.

Foch said to me one day—'Robertson builds small, but he builds solid.' This was to do him less than justice. While it is true that his conceptions were solid and his plans built on foundations that will withstand the criticism of time, he was not devoid of strategic imagination. His military mind knew but one fetter, and that was his unshakable loyalty to the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig. For the sake of standing by Haig he probably put aside and overrode many ideas of his own. This conception of his duty was pushed to the farthest possible extreme and finally led indirectly to his resignation. He was *plus royaliste que le roi*.

This whale of a man, this soldier shipwrecked on the desert island of politics, had his Man Friday. This was the Director of Military Operations, General Maurice, Freddy Maurice to the army. He and his Chief evoked the idea of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza reversed, if it is possible to imagine a short and portly Knight of La Mancha followed by an elongated attendant.

Maurice represented another but equally characteristic type of Englishman. As imperturbable as a fish, always unruffled, the sort of man who would eat porridge by gaslight on a foggy morning in winter, looking as if he had enjoyed a cold bath, all aglow with soap and water, just as cheerful as if he were eating a peach in a sunny garden in August.

A very tall, very fair man, a little bent, with a boxer's flattened-out nose, an eye-glass as flat and not much rounder than his face, and a rather abrupt manner. A little *distract* owing to great inner concentration, he simply demolished work, never forgot anything, knew everything, was quite impervious to the moods of his chief, the accurate interpreter of his grunts and groans, and his most efficient if not outwardly brilliant second. No man ever wasted fewer words or expressed himself when he spoke with greater clarity and conciseness.

An admirable character, the soul of military honour, with a deep sense of civic duty inherited from a family which placed service to the country and to the people of the country above all else, he too suffered acutely from the tactics of the politicians and their too subtle methods. Mr. Lloyd George in particular he came to distrust profoundly, and he finally ruined his career in the Army (though he gained the admiration of his fellow-countrymen) by defying the all-powerful Prime Minister and telling the nation the truth that was being withheld from it.

These men were torn by conflicting loyalties. They did their best to serve their political chiefs faithfully, but they had a higher duty to the nation. They had to carry out the policy of the Government, but it was incumbent upon them to see that that policy was sound and likely to lead to victory. If they could but get the Government's policy to conform to the elementary tenets of strategy they would back it for all they were worth, but this was no easy task; the pack they whipped in to had an incredible proclivity for breaking away and following the scent of every stray hare or rabbit that crossed its path. To vary the simile and imagine these soldiers not as huntsmen but as hounds, they were daily on the track of Mr. Lloyd George's strategic conceptions, and it must be admitted that two colder-nosed hounds never hunted out a wily Welsh fox. The more he dodged the closer they stuck to him, uncompromisingly giving tongue on a scent that was always hot.

They were hard on his heels as he twisted and dodged to overthrow the Chantilly plan. His answer to their arguments was to produce, at an Inter-Allied conference held in Rome during the first week of January 1917, a plan of his own. He proposed a Franco-British-Italian attack through the Julian Alps, with Trieste, Pola and eventually Vienna as its objectives.

This proposal had a mixed reception. The British soldiers were

completely taken aback at finding their own Prime Minister putting forward a plan they had never heard of. The French were not pleased. French military opinion was in the main overwhelmingly in favour of the concentration of the maximum forces in the main theatre. Confronted with Mr. Lloyd George's proposals, they urged that nothing should be done that was likely to compromise the offensive in France.

Nothing daunted, Mr. Lloyd George said that twenty thousand railway waggons could transport an Anglo-French force to Italy without running any of the usual risks of sea transport. He stated that part of the British heavy artillery now facing the Germans in France could be usefully employed in Italy. French and British soldiers were equally startled by the idea of sending our guns to sun themselves in Italy, leaving the vital defensive positions in France greatly weakened. General Cadorna, the Italian Commander-in-Chief, consulted on the subject, said the heavy artillery sent to Italy might well have to remain there, which statement made Mr. Lloyd George's proposal even less attractive to the French and British soldiers than it had appeared at first.

The Italians were, however, delighted with the idea since it meant strengthening their front.

The Roumanian defeat had greatly impressed them. They saw in it the possibility of the Austrians' strengthening their front in Italy, and, when asked to send further reinforcements to Salonika, the Italian Prime Minister had answered that public opinion was concerned lest troops necessary for defending the national territory should be withdrawn, since the threat of a powerful enemy offensive was becoming each day more imminent.

That the Italians were really anxious was proved by the fact that they had increased the number of their divisions in the front line to such an extent that they had few available reserves.

Their thesis was that Franco-British reinforcements should be sent to Italy and, should the enemy offensive not materialize, join with the Italians in a large-scale attack on the Carso.

To this extent the Italian plan coincided with that of Mr. Lloyd George, but as such an operation could only materialize in the late spring of 1917, it ran counter to the Chantilly decisions which bound all the Allies.

The French General Staff, although determined that nothing should be allowed to interfere with the projected offensive in France,

was not unmindful of the possibility of the Austro-Germans' launching an attack on the Italian front, and had sent a mission to study the problem on the spot.

The War Office representatives, on the other hand, maintained that the proper way to parry such an operation was to strengthen the Italian line defensively as much as possible, and be ready to attack in France if the enemy launched an offensive in Italy. As the Somme had relieved Verdun, they argued, so a blow in France would relieve our southern allies.

Again General Robertson said, as he was never tired of saying, that the enemy being on interior lines it was to play his game to disperse our effort. He had already informed the French liaison officer in London that British units, but recently formed, would lose much of their value if employed on ground and in conditions to which they were unused.

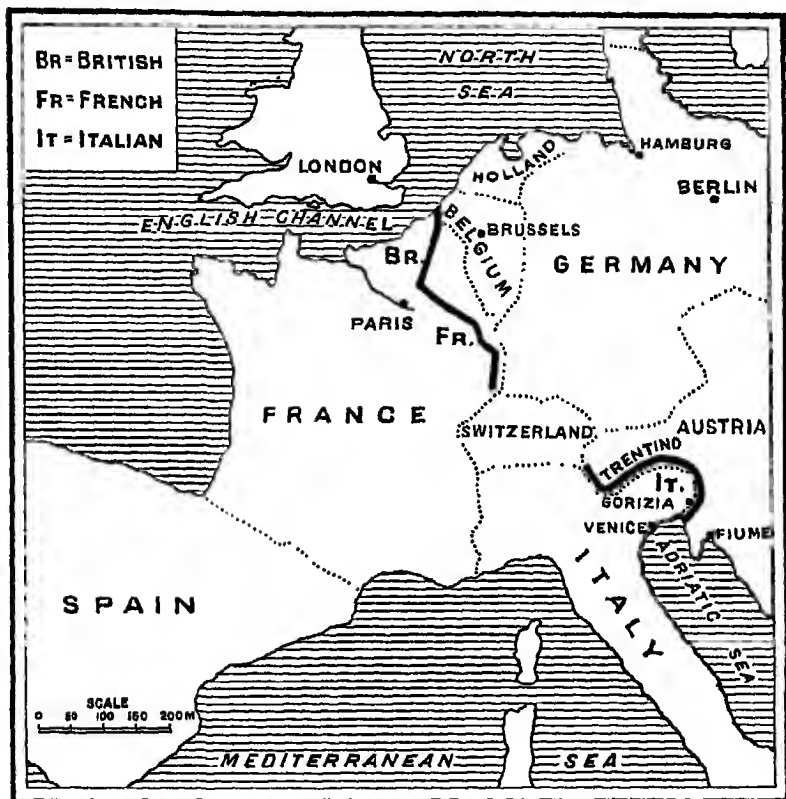
In deference to Mr. Lloyd George, the Rome Conference declared that those present wished to draw attention 'to the favourable conditions the Italian front presented for an Allied offensive on the Western Front', but in deference to military opinion the question was referred to the military experts of the three Governments.

A few days later the Italians declared that three or four Franco-British corps and three hundred heavy guns would be necessary for an offensive on the Isonzo front, provided the Trentino front was sufficiently strong to withstand any attack. Such an operation could, the Italians declared, be launched about May 1st.

This opinion clearly ruled out the project, since it would mean abandoning all hope of attacking the Germans in France, and so died one of Mr. Lloyd George's greatest strategic conceptions, not, however, without having caused recriminations, much heart-burning and the raising of false hopes in Italian breasts.

Whatever the merits of Mr. Lloyd George's plan, there was nothing to be said for the method he had adopted in putting it forward. A civilian Minister can and should appoint military advisers in whom he has confidence, and dismiss them if they lose or forfeit that confidence, but it is utterly wrong and mischievous that he should disregard his official advisers and himself put forward military plans which he cannot possibly work out, or even defend, with the necessary technical knowledge. It might have been better had General Robertson resigned then and there: but he knew that others, more pliable than he, would be ready to take his place, and

he thought, rightly or wrongly, that it was in the best interests of the State that he should swallow his personal humiliation and remain at his post.



On the return journey of the British delegation from Rome, General Nivelle presented himself to them at a wayside station. He said that he wished to modify General Joffre's plan, and begged for British support for the ideas he began then and there to expound; but the time was short and the proposals he made too radical to be lightly accepted; so he was invited to come to London, where he could explain his plans at leisure, and this invitation he gladly accepted.

For many of the British soldiers and politicians this was their first

encounter with the new French Commander-in-Chief who had risen like a meteor in the military sky, obliterating with his brilliance the last dim rays of Joffre's setting star. Mr. Lloyd George had met him upon an earlier occasion and was enthusiastic about him. A story Briand had told him had fired his imagination. It seemed that Nivelle had said that at a given hour on a given day he would ring him up and tell him that Douaumont had fallen, and at the exact hour stated the telephone bell had rung, and there was Nivelle, calling up from Verdun to say that he had kept his promise and Douaumont was in French hands again. The British Prime Minister's manner as he repeated this story showed clearly how much he appreciated methods like these, not the least merit of which in his eyes was the implied condemnation of those he believed to be in vogue in the British Army.

Another point in General Nivelle's favour was that Mr. Lloyd George liked the shape of his head. He was a great believer in his own powers as a phrenologist. He often judged men in this way; he either liked the shape of a man's head or he did not, and General Nivelle's cranium found favour in his eyes.

Again, Nivelle spoke fluent English. This enhanced the qualities of any foreign soldier in the eyes of British politicians to an inordinate degree.

Before leaving for England, General Nivelle drew up a note intended both to answer certain objections to his proposals raised by Sir Douglas Haig and to convince the British Government of their merits.<sup>1</sup> In it he stated the French objections to Mr. Lloyd George's proposed attack through Italy.

Only the destruction of the principal mass of the enemy's forces can bring about the end of the war.

The principal mass of the German forces, which alone is important, is on the Western Front; it comprises 130 out of a total of 200 divisions, and includes the best troops.

To beat them, it is necessary in the first place to break through the trench system.

Is this operation possible? To this question the Army of Verdun, in the fighting between October 24th and December 15th, has given an affirmative answer.

<sup>1</sup> They had met on December 20th, and this meeting had been followed up by letters from Nivelle to Haig, dated December 21st and January 2nd, in which he had explained his plans (See Appendices II and III), to which Haig replied on January 6th (Appendix IV).

We will break through the German front when we wish, on condition that we do not attack it at its strongest point, and that the operation is carried out by a sudden surprise attack, and is not extended beyond twenty-four or forty-eight hours.

Nivelle came to London and attended conferences on January 15th and 16th. His visit was an immense personal success. Hostesses vied with each other, in spite of the food shortage, to entertain as lavishly as possible this charming soldier who spoke English so well and was such a contrast to old Joffre, who, now the ladies came to think of it, had really been little more than a peasant. 'He was the son of a cooper somewhere down in the south of France, I am told.'

General Nivelle was delightful, and explained his methods in the most enchanting way across the dinner-table to enthralled and enraptured women, who dashed off to tell their friends as much of the talk as they had understood. Not all he said fell on deaf or uncomprehending or safe ears, and the English soldiers shook their heads. As someone said at the time—'It's a pity General Nivelle's train did not stop long enough in Abbeville Station for him to read the notice put up there.' This notice, an enormous affair which every warrior on his way to the front must have seen, ran:

A wise old owl sat in an oak,  
The more he heard the less he spoke,  
The less he spoke the more he heard,  
Soldiers, copy this wise old bird.

But there were more than verbal imprudences. The French plan, which like all military operations depended so much on secrecy, had been put down on paper and sent ahead of General Nivelle, not only to Haig and Robertson, which was quite proper, but also to the French Government which transmitted it to our Foreign Office where copies were made and given to at least ten people.

The plan which General Nivelle explained and developed to the British soldiers and Ministers completely altered the scope and balance of that settled at Chantilly, although it retained the general framework of Joffre's conception.

The Franco-British forces were still to attack on the Aisne, at Arras and to the south of that town as originally decided,<sup>1</sup> but the front of attack was greatly extended and was to include the extremely strong German positions on the plateau of Craonne which frowned

<sup>1</sup> See Maps facing pages 29 and 560.



down on the Aisne. Joffre had intended attacking on a front of a hundred kilometres. Nivelle proposed to extend this by another seventy kilometres.

The British, instead of assuming the main burden of the assault, were to be relegated to a secondary rôle, while the eastern part of the southern face of the formidable German positions, the corner stone of their defensive system, was to be attacked frontally by the French instead of being turned as General Joffre had intended.

The main weight of the blow, instead of being delivered south of Arras, was to fall on the Aisne. For a straight thrust with the left and a punch with the right was to be substituted an uppercut with the right, or rather the thrust with the left was to become a feint and the uppercut was to be relied on as the knock-out.

The Franco-British forces holding the Arras front and the line to the south, that is the British First, Third, Fourth and Fifth Armies and the three French Armies of the Groupe des Armées du Nord, were to deliver what was now to be a secondary attack for the purpose of drawing in the German reserves. This attack was to precede the main one on the Aisne by a week or a fortnight. The more important operation was to take place on a line extending from Reims to the Aisne-Oise Canal and would be faced by German positions of unusual natural strength.

This main attack was to be delivered, as stated above, as soon as it was evident that the subsidiary attack farther north had made its effect felt, that is when the German reserves had been drawn to it, and was to take the shape of a terrific, violent and sudden blow, to be delivered by the three Armies of a new Group to be formed, to be known officially as the G.A.R.—Groupe des Armées de Réserve. To the initiated, however, these initials stood for 'Groupe des Armées de Rupture'. This Group was to comprise one million two hundred thousand men. The artillery preparation, no longer to be confined to the first line, was to cover the whole depth of the enemy's position. The assault was to be pressed up to and beyond the enemy's last lines of defence, and was to include his heavy artillery positions. The infantry, closely supported by the field artillery, was to advance under a continuous barrage preceding the men by seventy metres (approximately seventy-six yards). The waves of the infantry following each other closely were not to allow themselves to be held up by undestroyed hostile defences. They were to pass these, leaving them to be dealt with by small supporting columns.

The whole operation was to take from twenty-four to forty-eight hours. If by that time it had not proved successful it was to be discontinued. If on the other hand a breach of sufficient width was made, a torrent of reserves was to be poured in, rolling up the enemy's line, while the cavalry, pressing forward, was to paralyse and destroy his communications.

Sir Douglas Haig and General Robertson both raised the question of weather conditions. General Nivelle, in answer to questions on the subject put him by Mr. Lloyd George and Lord Curzon, said that bad weather would not be an obstacle to the offensive. It was a 'secondary consideration for an army determined to conquer', he affirmed.

General Nivelle argued that as he was prepared to undertake the greatest effort, the British, to enable him to do so, must relieve part of the French line. The British soldiers at once pointed out that this must entail delay. No extension of the British front could take place until six additional divisions arrived from Egypt, and the totality of these fresh troops would not have arrived until the end of February. They drew attention to the fact that continuous pressure and speed were essential factors of Joffre's plan; under Nivelle's at least a month must be lost.

The War Office Staff were in fact frankly dubious about the whole plan. They failed to see the analogy between the successful French operations at Vaux and Douaumont, which were local operations, and the projected attack, which was a major one. They were doubtful, too, as to whether artillery preparation could possibly be effective on the whole depth of the German defensive system, that is a distance of from five to twelve miles, across which stretched from nine to twelve lines of trenches, comprising three or four complete defensive positions. In the light of previous experience it seemed impossible that the infantry could overrun these in eight hours, and certain that fresh artillery preparation would be necessary before the second and third systems were assaulted. The English soldiers told the Ministers in conversations at which the French were not present that they did not believe, however great the concentration of guns, that the more distant trench lines could be sufficiently pounded from the original positions. Guns would have to be moved up and registered, and new air photographs taken. In fact they argued that it would be impossible to carry the whole German defences at one bound, and that in any case the time allowed was too short.

If they were right about this, it would mean the breakdown of the whole plan, for the most detailed preparations would have to be made and the guns given the most minute time-tables. If the infantry did not keep up with the barrage and lifts of fire, this would involve a divorce of the two forces, the advancing men and their protective belt of shells, and failure would be inevitable.

Sir William Robertson was at pains to underline Sir Douglas Haig's argument that one of the results of extending our line would be to weaken it, by absorbing reserves needed to make sure the enemy would not break through in the direction of the vitally important Channel ports. It would also mean that newly raised infantry units, full of raw recruits and ill-trained officers, would not have the necessary training, without which efficiency would be sacrificed and success jeopardized.

It did not escape the General Staff that one of the things in General Nivelle's proposals which most pleased our War Cabinet was that the French were to have the chief rôle and bear the main burden of the attack. It is not unfair to assume that Mr. Lloyd George, although he has not actually recorded any such statement, believed that the French, more ably led, would be more likely to achieve success than the English, for he had a poor opinion of British generalship.<sup>1</sup> What is certain is that the British statesman naturally assumed that under the new proposal the French would suffer a greater proportion of casualties than would have been the case under the Joffre plan. The enormous losses of the Somme had revolted Mr. Lloyd George and alarmed the country, unaccustomed to being plunged into almost universal mourning. Here was a chance of a respite. But this assumption was ruthlessly demolished by Sir William Robertson. He pointed out that a great effort by the French would increase their losses without in any way diminishing those of the British, who would quite naturally and properly be expected, whatever plan was adopted, to make the maximum effort of which they were capable and maintain it for as long as was necessary.

He also said that the offensive in Flanders, to which the Admiralty and at least some members of the Government attached the greatest importance, as being the most effective if not the only means of relieving the submarine menace, would inevitably become subsidiary to Nivelle's great attack.

<sup>1</sup> According to M. Paul Cambon (*Journal d'Alexandre Ribot*, p. 49) Mr. Lloyd George urged Nivelle to 'express his opinion of Haig freely' and was greatly disappointed when Nivelle did not do so during his visit to London on January 15th and 16th.

Who could tell when the Flanders operation could take place? That would depend upon when the main offensive was over, which would be a question for the French and not for ourselves to settle, as the weight we could place behind a blow on the coast must depend on how much our effort in support of the French farther south had cost in men and material. Furthermore, if the French offensive was delayed and in spite of General Nivelle's prognostications slow in developing, then an offensive in Flanders might become impossible, since good weather conditions were essential for both its preparation and prosecution, and the weather is apt to break early in Flanders.

These arguments were all put to General Nivelle at the different conferences as well as in private conversations. Those concerning the Flanders offensive he brushed aside. If his operations were successful, he said, the coast would be cleared automatically; if not, since he had no intention of becoming involved in prolonged operations, measures for clearing it could be undertaken later as had been originally planned.

The War Cabinet paid little heed to Sir William Robertson's arguments. Mr. Lloyd George in particular felt that all they proved was the unwillingness of British military leaders to co-operate in General Nivelle's plan, of which he had become an enthusiastic backer and which he was determined to see carried out.

In vain did Sir William Robertson plead that, whatever General Nivelle might say, once a battle was engaged it could not be broken off as if it were a mere raid or a stick of chocolate. It was, he said, nonsense for the French Commander-in-Chief to talk about ceasing operations as and when he wished. Once the trench system was broken through, the fighting swayed and neither side could call a halt at its pleasure. It was impossible. An operation on the scale planned by General Nivelle, supposing it did not result in a breakthrough, would, according to all experience, inevitably leave the attackers holding an uneven jagged front drawn according to the resistance or success they had met with. There would be necessary adjustments to be made, crests, points of observation to be seized, flanks to be protected; all this would necessitate operations which, although of a secondary nature, would take time but could not be avoided. The enemy would certainly react. Who then could possibly say when a big attack would cease, or how soon the troops employed in it could be used elsewhere? Did this not

depend upon the effort they had made, the losses they had incurred?

Sir William Robertson argued in vain: every objection he put forward struck his civilian listeners as being inspired by narrow professional prejudice, reeking with the Somme heresy, and soaked in insular preconceptions. He had nothing to offer to counterbalance what Nivelle promised. Speedy results and economy in human life! What chance had this old-fashioned cook against the new *chef* who argued so convincingly that he could make an omelette without breaking eggs? The Cabinet did not hesitate: they accepted General Nivelle's plan and assured its author that they would support it to the fullest extent in their power.

So deeply had General Nivelle impressed the Cabinet, that the day after the London Conference General Robertson was ordered to send a special instruction to Haig, telling him that the Government attached the greatest importance to the agreement arrived at in London being carried out 'in the letter and in the spirit'. The British forces were instructed to be ready to play their part on or before the date laid down. On no account were the French to have to wait for us.





THE AUTHOR IN 1917

## CHAPTER III

### LIAISON

THESE important events in London soon had their repercussion on even such a small pawn in the game as myself.

I had been a liaison officer attached to the French Sixth Army during the whole of the fighting on the Somme and the early winter of 1916. When this army was withdrawn into reserve in December I had been transferred to the Tenth Army. In January 1917 under doctor's orders I at last got home leave. Weary, sick and still suffering from some slight damage sustained during the previous summer, I opened my front door in London to be handed a telegram ordering me back to France forthwith.

It is difficult to describe, and unpleasant to remember, the disappointment and weariness caused by such a summons. Many have had the experience. I am fond of France, but the mere mention of that country just then made me feel sick.

For one thing, the order evidently meant I must go back to my job as liaison officer, whereas I had been promised the command of a battalion if someone could be found to do my work. This was a bad set-back to a much cherished hope. On the return journey I pondered gloomily about the work I was going back to.

A curious job, that of liaison officer, with ill-defined duties. These, such as they were, had been evolved out of accumulated experience. The advantage, from the point of view of the individual carrying them out, was knowledge such as an officer of his rank would not normally have an inkling of. He lived a far more interesting life than his *confrères* in that he saw, spoke to and worked with commanders whom he would never otherwise have approached. There was plenty of responsibility for those who liked it. The liaison officer would often be called upon without warning not only to explain a situation but to interpret it, to foretell how a general would act, what the result of an operation was likely to be. His job was less monotonous than most though there was much drudgery. He had to become a specialist in all sorts of subjects at short notice and really to master them. Railways, roads, supplies, all came his way, and he had to understand all artillery questions as well as the



mechanism of infantry movement and fire power. He had to be well versed in his profession, trained to grasp the great principles of war and strategy, otherwise he would hardly have understood what his chiefs or the French leaders were talking about when they explained their plans and ideas; this entailed a good knowledge of military history.

He enjoyed more liberty than the vast majority of officers in the army. The only means of judging his work was by results. This was the best aspect of his duties. A shirker might have managed to avoid much dangerous work by relying on the reports of others, but he would, I think, soon have been found out. When his orders were to report upon a dangerous sector or to keep his superiors constantly informed of the situation in that portion of the line, he had to go there, stay there, return there, understand the conditions and the point of view of both the men and the officers on the spot. There were often many such sectors in the zone he was responsible for.

If an attack was impending at the junction of the Franco-British forces, he had to know every inch of the ground, every commander involved, every gun emplacement. The only means of knowing how an attack had progressed, the only way to send in a useful report from which lessons or deductions concerning it might be drawn, was to witness events at close quarters.

In the early days of the war I was responsible for the liaison from the front trench to the Army Commander and on to G.H.Q., to whom I ultimately reported. At each echelon there were a Frenchman and an Englishman, from the companies at the front where the two armies joined, up to the Army, and I had to endeavour to be the link between each. Truly a heavy job, especially if it be remembered that all the higher formations had Supply as well as Operations and Intelligence sections, each demanding service. It was necessary to devise carefully-thought-out time-tables which were apt to be upset either by the enemy's action or by a peremptory order from above. Experience alone showed the time required for each task, how often in quiet periods each sector would require visiting. As a general rule, points beyond divisional headquarters could only be reached on foot, which took much time. The only way I ever solved the time problem was by motoring a lot at night. During the latter part of 1914 and the whole of 1915 I was tramping the lines or motoring never less than five nights a week. One slept when one could, at odd times. In the course of the war I had fifty-six motor cars, French or English, issued to me.

Half way through the Somme, as the work had clearly become impossible, mainly owing to the increased distances that had to be covered, congestion and bad road surfaces, which all entailed delay, liaison officers were appointed to the divisions, and this worked very well thanks to the excellence of the officers concerned.

These various considerations were part of what I would call the satisfactory side of liaison. The disadvantages were as follows. The liaison officer was nobody's child, though nominally attached to Operations (after a great battle waged and lost by Intelligence way back in 1914). Every section in every staff had a call on him. They could all give him orders, request him to provide information. Woe betide him if he did not carry out the instructions of one because he was working for the other. This was apt to be taken as a reflection on the importance of the department concerned, whose chief was almost certain to take umbrage.

Invariably, if he did his work conscientiously, the liaison officer was explaining the point of view of one side to the other, and this was seldom popular. The result was that, always a foreigner to the French, he was apt to be viewed with suspicion by his own people. It is human nature to have doubts about one of your own side who develops and defends the thesis of the other. It is also human nature to vent on the bearer of bad news or tiresome messages the annoyance you feel towards the sender, especially if the bearer is very junior to you in rank and the sender far away and too exalted to be censured.

Curiously enough, officers of very high rank, that is much older men, were seldom inconsiderate, whether they were French or English. Officers just senior to me gave me the roughest passages and their strictures were hardest to bear. It is much less unpleasant to receive a dressing-down from an Army Commander than from someone just a rank ahead of you in the Army List.

The French were generally pleasant and considerate after their characteristic cold reserve had worn off, but when things went badly or there was a strain due to something going wrong in the course of an operation, their quick mercurial temperament impelled some of them, especially the juniors, to develop a very wounding attitude. I hasten to say that on some Staffs such incidents were almost unknown.

Responsibility is not unpleasant, but that of the liaison officer is of a special kind, as is shown, I think, in a previous book I have written and will appear again in these pages. It is not the kind of respon-

sibility involved in backing a plan of your own creation, but that implied in advocating and in some cases guaranteeing the efficacy, feasibility and success of proposals put up by others. It is the responsibility of stating that a part of the line would hold, that such a point would be captured, which might easily involve very serious consequences if a mistake were made. That kind of responsibility is very nerve-racking.

It was a lonely job. The most difficult decisions had always to be taken when there was none to advise; but it was the anomalous position of always being the devil's advocate, of never being at one with either side, that ended by creating within you an overwhelming sense of solitude. The strain was apt to become such that it often seemed as if anything would be preferable. There were times when I became mutinous in my clamours to be relieved. I was of course in the wrong. In war-time each man must do the work his superiors think he is best suited for, and there is an end to it.

But the greatest hardship of all, which gave me the only legitimate excuse I had for endeavouring to obtain relief from liaison work, was to be deprived of the hope and ambition of every officer, that of leading into action the men he has trained and worked with.

My return journey to France was exactly the same as all the journeys those of us who went through the war remember. This time I was spared the shock I had had on a previous occasion, when a King's Messenger, who had kindly offered me a seat in his compartment, began to load his revolver as soon as we left Victoria Station, waving the weapon about in a way that caused me to classify the incident as one of the more dangerous experiences I went through during the war.

The sea-passage was rough and the decks of the packed boat, on which sprawled sea-sick, spray-drenched troops, did not present a pleasant or an exhilarating spectacle, but I was sustained by the thought that I had old-soldiered the Embarkation Officer out of appointing me Ship's Adjutant or O.C. troops, or something equally tiresome.

On landing at Boulogne the Embarkation Officer there handed me an order to report at once to G.H.Q., so I accordingly made for Montreuil and reported to the Operations section. There I was told that I had been recalled because an extension of the British front had been decided upon. We were to relieve the French on the Somme

as far as G  nermont, in accordance with a new plan that had just been settled. My main duty was to see that the relief was carried out smoothly and that the French did not take away what should be left behind; this applied particularly to the railways. Special attention was to be paid to the artillery reliefs: all the information they required was to be made available to them; in particular, all the French maps, air photographs and intelligence reports were to be brought up to date and handed over.

These duties were not to prevent my keeping in touch with the front, and I was to report frequently on how the French preparations for the offensive were progressing. I was to see forthwith the different departments concerned at G.H.Q. and receive their instructions.

General 'Tavish' Davidson, Major-General in charge of Operations, sent for me. He said it had been decided to increase the scope of my duties. Not only was I to continue to carry out the liaison between the French Tenth and the British Fourth Armies, but also between General d'Esp  rey's Groupe des Arm  es du Nord and G.H.Q. I was to make whatever arrangements I thought fit to carry out these duties.

I told him that it seemed to me I could hardly hope to discharge efficiently duties involving dealings with an Army Group Commander unless he took me completely into his confidence. He agreed to do this, and after outlining the new plan and underlining its implications decreed that, for the first time, I was to have access to the 'Secret Box'. I spent a long time browsing through its contents, looking at plans and orders, reading Nivelle's and Haig's letters, but was disappointed to find it contained little I did not know, nothing I had not guessed.

It was an immense relief to me, though I said not a word, to find that the extension of our line was accepted without so much as a murmur at G.H.Q.<sup>1</sup> There was not a sign of the fierce opposition its mere mention had often raised in the past and was to raise in the future. On this occasion it was accepted as only fair that Nivelle, since he wished to assume the main burden of the offensive, should be allowed to recover troops in this way. Nevertheless the change of plan meant that the British Army, which had received such a terrific gruelling on the Somme, would not be given a fair chance to recover, but our Staff set their teeth and did not complain.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix V (page 536).

Having been given my instructions, I left for Moreuil, the H.Q. of the French Tenth Army. The drive was bitterly cold. No amount of practice diminished the suffering entailed by long drives in an open car, generally at night, when the bad roads were frozen as they were on this occasion, and skidding was the rule rather than the exception.

Although I had spent some time with the Tenth Army Staff at Moreuil before leaving for England, I did not know them well, and until you had worked for a long time with the French and gained their confidence, the atmosphere of cordiality which was so valuable in liaison work was absent. Although the manners of the officer class were almost always perfect, outward urbanity shielded great reserve, but when you had gained their trust those for whom you had natural sympathy became perfect and very trustful friends. To laugh at the same things was a great bond, and luckily their sense of humour appealed to me and I appreciated their quick and ready wit. The brevel majority I had been given at the close of the Somme fighting was an additional handicap to rapid and close intimacy with men of my own age. The French are great respecters of rank, and a field officer was an important person generally ten or fifteen years older than I was then. '*Mon Commandant*'; the words created a barrier of discipline. On the other hand my new rank greatly facilitated relations with senior officers.

With enlarged responsibilities I knew I should miss more than ever the Sixth Army Staff I had got to know so well on the Somme. The place where it had resided, Méricourt-sur-Somme, I had however not been sorry to leave. Ever since the autumn had set in, it had always been enveloped in thick drenching fog in the morning, and it was bombed and machine-gunned on practically every clear night. The inner debate in which we all indulged when the whirr of propellers was heard in the sky tended to become monotonous. The problem which weary men had to solve was whether it was worth while to get out of one's cosy flea-bag and make for the safety of the shallow wet shelter-trenches or not. I think few of the fatalists we had all become ever left the huts.

Much as I disliked the place it had been a wrench to bid farewell to the Staff at Méricourt; most of them I greatly liked and of many I had grown to be very fond. I was not to see most of them again: the war took a heavy toll of those gay and charming companions with whom I had explored most of the dreary sectors of the great Somme battlefield.

We had had our bad moments when the tension was great and there was much electricity in the air, but happily it is not those times that I remember but rather the moments when, with eyes that for once were not smiling, a friend lifted his head out of a hole, expressing in every fibre relief at being still alive; the wild panting race for shelter, the helping hand out of the mud when the bullets whistled and an utterly reliable companion stooped at great peril to prize you out. It is those things I remember and am glad of, and so to-day I can testify that not once in a long experience, which included many an adventure, did one of those Frenchmen let me down or behave less well than the most exacting standards of comradeship and honour demanded.

I can remember them all, and to those who may survive I send across the gap of twenty years a message of greeting and of gratitude for being just what they were, earnest or comic, jolly or solemn, for one and all they were good fellows. I can even remember without annoyance, for he also had good qualities, Commandant Phillipot, the head of the Third Bureau (the Operations section) to which I was more directly attached, although he was a sore trial to me at the time. He was a curious little creature belonging to the Colonial Army, whose odd moods were ascribed to too much tropical sun on his high bald head. The explanation furnished for his long nose was that it had once been seized by a very old and toothless crocodile from whose jaws he had extracted it owing to its slipperiness. His sartorial *beau idéal* was supposed to be Puss in Boots, for he wore enormous riding boots which looked like the stands for a telescope of which his gigantic eyeglass was the lens.

Living in a French mess had, like most things in this world, both advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes when things were going badly my position was a trying one, for the French are highly strung and it would have been too much to expect that I should not be made conscious of the fact that there were times when in their eyes our Army or Command was at fault. I dare say French liaison officers could have told the same tale about the British Staffs to which they were attached. But these clouds soon vanished, and my memories of French *popotes*, as they called their messes, are pleasant ones.

There were amusing incidents at times. I was reminded of one not long ago; walking down a Paris street I was astonished to see a little man running towards me through the traffic at the risk of his

life. Breathlessly he called out 'I knew you at once. You were *Président de Table* at Vic-sur-Aisne in 1917'.

Now *Président de Table* means Mess President, and it was true, so intimately did we work with the French at this time, that when I was with the G.A.N. not only did General d'Especey ask me to do jobs for him at the front when my work took me to places he wanted reports about, but I presided in Mess when I happened to be the senior officer present, which was embarrassing at times for, a major by then, I was much younger than most French captains. One of the duties of the President was to admonish late-comers, and the little man told me how, wandering into a mess in search of food, he had been amazed to find an Englishman at the head of the table, but his amazement had been changed to stupor when this foreigner hurled at him the ritual formula: 'Monsieur, if the time at which we have elected to dine does not suit you, we will adopt the hour you may be pleased to appoint, but once we have adopted it we shall ask you to be so good as to conform to it.'

The words never varied and were hard to deliver without fumbling. They invariably provoked loud laughter, and there in the Paris street this small ex-officer, holding a hat I could not persuade him to put on, told me how he had felt an astonishment which another year and a half of war and many years of peace had not dissipated.

It was fortunate that, living on top of each other as we did, small individual idiosyncrasies, annoying when things were going badly, were generally merely amusing, the subject of good-humoured quips, at which we often laughed till we cried.

In the main, however, an English mess, or at least one of the Regular Army ones, was pleasanter to live in than a French one even though the food was much less good. The relationship between officers was freer. This was partly due to the fact that with us regiments are families in which an officer serves his whole career, the officers in one corps really looking upon themselves as brothers; 'a brother officer' we say of a man we served with, and it means a great deal, a oneness of pride in that infinitely precious thing, the regimental honour. In the French Army a man will move from one regiment to another, and however much he may glory in the efficiency and smartness of the unit he is serving with, he cannot have our corporate spirit, tradition and fraternal intimacy.

The *bonhomie*, the sense of social equality which enables British

officers off duty to cast aside rank and consort as members of an exclusive club would do, the position of seniors safeguarded only by the good manners of their juniors, were hardly possible in the French Army, where officers did not live together in peace-time as ours did, where the mess as we understand it did not exist, and where officers were drawn from every section of the middle classes as well as from the highest aristocracy.

A good deal of freedom prevailed in the French *popotes*, but the freedom was that which wit gives rather than the complete ease of serene, unassuming and uninquisitive familiarity to be found in our messes. Conversation had generally more scope and latitude than would have been acceptable to us, and the talk was good. But if some French *popotes* were often delightful others were intolerably dull; this unfestive atmosphere when it occurred was in the main attributable to senior officers who had to be listened to with respect. The favourite subject of conversation among these elders seemed to be endless recapitulations of the names of cadets they had served with decades before at St. Cyr, the French Sandhurst, or speculation as to how senior to them a man might be. Trying to remember whether he was an *ancien* or a *grand ancien* would keep them theorizing for hours, and the fact that another belonged to their *promotion*, that is, was a member of the same batch for automatic promotion as they were, would electrify these simple warriors.

Such prosy fraternities were luckily rare and the *popote* generally speaking was extremely gay. As I write I conjure up this or that charming and witty companion in his blue uniform, eyes sparkling with merriment as he shot shaft after shaft at some less well-equipped colleague, or another, a *pince sans rire*, launching forth with a perfectly straight face into a tale of the most accurately described and screamingly funny impossibilities.

There were absurd stories about entirely fantastic animals supposed to live in Africa called *lames*. These quadrupeds were said to have shorter limbs on one side of their bodies than on the other, which compelled them to keep to one contour all their lives and to move always in one direction, and the tales concerning them made grey-headed men laugh till their sides ached.

The greatest amusement was always caused by the comic version of some incident or other, the mimicking of some great chief. Foch in particular provided an endless source of fun, with his wooden movements, his cap on one side and his cigar that would never draw



and that he was for ever re-lighting. The difficulty he found in expressing himself gave us joy when mimicked at mess, however trying it might be in reality to the officers whose duty it was to endeavour to grasp his meaning. A young officer trying to look like Foch sitting astride a chair, as the great man was wont to do, would draw in his breath until he looked as if he would die of congestion, while he used up a match-box in an endeavour to light an imaginary cigar, then burst out '*Le perroquet, animal subtil...*', which was actually what Foch had said when he had tried years before to give a lecture on advanced guards. The General had stood for a quarter of an hour trying to get a word out, then the astonishing sentence had burst forth in time to prevent his dying of apoplexy. That had been the end of the lecture, and his audience had thought Foch had this time really gone off his head, but one cleverer than the others guessed the riddle. A parrot climbing up its cage seizes one bar with its beak, another with its claw and only when these two points are firmly held does the second claw move up—so should an advanced guard progress.

But it was an incident in which I was myself concerned at Méricourt that caused me the greatest amusement; the recollection of it makes me smile to this day.

A French divisional commander had been having some rather special trouble with the British who were to take over from him. He was a difficult man and, if I remember rightly, had narrowly escaped court martial for striking an N.C.O. He had complained of us in terms devoid of all amenity to the Army Liaison Officer, Captain de Grandmaison, who was very worried about it. Being a man of peace and furthermore a Deputy, he believed in the soft answer that turneth away wrath.

Well aware of this, and taking most of the Sixth Army Staff into my confidence, I slipped into the hut next to the one in which Grandmaison was sitting with the officers of the Operations section, and rang him up on the telephone. I said I was General X (the irate divisional commander) and proceeded to call the British every rude name I could think of. Down the telephone came Grandmaison's voice in smooth, soothing, respectful protest. But by then I had got well started, and a frightful stream of abuse poured down the line. The poor man at the other end was almost in tears, appalled at the storm he realized he would have to appease, and distraught at his inability to placate the furious general he imagined was speaking to

him. Through a window at which my companions were also peering I could see him, a heavy grey-haired man, jumping about clasping the receiver in one hand, waving the other as if he were brushing aside a swarm of bees, his long nose getting longer, his deep wrinkles getting deeper all the time. Every now and then he would look round evidently in desperate fear lest I, the British liaison officer, should walk in and tumble to what it was all about, and whenever he looked round he wiped the sweat from his forehead with his free hand. My friends and I at our window collapsed on the floor with laughter several times, but one or other of us always managed to cover the mouthpiece so that he should not hear us. When this happened Grandmaison had a chance and his voice could be heard wavering down the line '*mais mon Général, mais mon Général . . .*' It really was very funny, but there was something more to it than a mere joke. This little comedy was meant to convey how foolish it was to recriminate instead of adjusting differences, and to show that the average Englishman thought that a vituperating little French general, dancing about with rage and blackguarding his allies because they did not act as if they were Frenchmen, was comic rather than tragic.

Then there was the young fellow who told us that he had been ordered to accompany an American journalist to Albert. Reverently the leaning Virgin on top of the church was pointed out to him. Before there was time to tell him of the legends and superstitions attached to the statue, the Yankee, chewing gum, hands in pockets, and hat at the back of his head, declared—'It reminds me of my brother George diving.' This anecdote was immediately capped by someone who told us he had heard a sad-faced long-nosed subaltern at the same spot declare as he gazed upwards: 'There are many virgins like that; they look as if they were about to fall but don't'.

But, as can be imagined, although it is pleasanter to remember amusing things rather than tragic incidents, there were more of the latter than the former in our lives, and these Frenchmen who could be so gay were made of very stern stuff indeed.

Stoicism was greatly prized amongst French officers. A general who heard of the death of his son without flinching was highly commended; in particular the demeanour of our General Congreve, himself a V.C., who had to come to Méricourt the day after his V.C. son had been killed, excited admiration. Not a word, not even a

slight stoop of the shoulders allowed any to guess how great was his grief. It could not have been otherwise; had men gone about with long faces mourning their friends it would have been intolerable. Each one kept his sorrows to himself, thinking no doubt that any day and at any moment it might be his own turn.

On arrival at Tenth Army Headquarters at Moreuil I found my little cohort of dispatch riders, excellent men all, and my invaluable French orderly, the bearded Glaudin, who had been with me for a long time, and now proudly wore on his stout chest the D.C.M. as well as the Croix de Guerre.

The first news that greeted me was that General Micheler had gone to command the new and mysterious G.A.R. This was an added cause for depression: for having had a permanent invitation to his table and having often availed myself of this privilege, I had come to know and like him greatly. General Micheler, who was to play so important and invidious a part in subsequent operations, had an extraordinary and very pleasing personality. Tall, bearded, dark, his pince-nez seemed to focus his keen gaze and strengthen the impression of concentrated intelligence he made. His talk was brilliant, full of verve, and his remarks unexpected and amusing. On his index finger he wore an enormous ring with a coloured stone, green I think it was, and this long finger encased in its Byzantine armour was constantly pointed at his audience, at the sky, at the door, towards the enemy, or in the direction where the G.Q.G. was supposed to be, in fact at whatever object his grasshopper mind was flitting to at the moment.

Micheler came in for a great deal of criticism later on, much of which seems to have been justified. It may be that he was not gifted with as much character as intelligence, though he certainly did not lack courage, but that, too, was apt to assume dangerous forms; he never hesitated to criticize anybody with devastating completeness. It was as if the long ringed finger was peeling the bluff from the pretensions of this or that great chief with the thoroughness of a parrot's beak stripping the shell off a nut, but too often he did this within the hearing of attentive ears, both military and civilian.

My heart sank when I was received by his successor, General Duchêne. He meant to be pleasant and asked me to have my meals at his table when at Moreuil, which was nice of him, but he suffered

sadly by comparison with his urbane predecessor, and I soon realized why it was that his Staff so cordially disliked him. Short, stout, sallow-complexioned and fair, his hair almost white, he spoke with the guttural intonation of the peasants of central France. His manner, even when he was trying to be polite, was brutal. His greeting conveyed the impression that he suspected you of being a thief intent on taking advantage of his short neck and general slowness, to investigate his back pockets.

At this our first meeting he prophesied a thundering victory by June, which does not seem to have awakened a corresponding echo in my mind for, noting the incident in my diary, I added the comment 'An optimist without a reason'.

General Duchêne later commanded the Army that was surprised and defeated on the Aisne in 1918. He was then relieved of his command. The last I heard of him was from a French officer who had seen him on one of the quays of Paris. It was an icy day, and he had on only a thin and threadbare overcoat, and his bowler hat was green. He looked cold and undernourished. I was very sorry when I heard of this, and remembered the magnificent command he had once exercised, his cars, his orderlies, his horses and the scores of thousands of men whose lives were in his hands. The Republic is not always generous to her old servants.

The position of both retired and serving soldiers has been improved of recent years, but immediately after the war it was absolutely disgraceful. I knew one very brilliant senior officer on the Staff in Paris who when on duty had a car with two soldiers on the box, but at other times could not afford a bus fare. I was also told of junior officers who, if they had no private means, used to change into civilian clothes and try to earn a few francs surreptitiously by driving taxis and by other methods. But none of this had happened at the time I am writing of; it is a glimpse into the future, an anticipation of the happy state of society we were all risking life and limb to achieve.

Hardly had I arrived at Moreuil when I was beset by the thousand difficulties of the relief, the innumerable little clashes between the French Army and ourselves which had to be adjusted, while others in the offing had to be foreseen and, if possible, averted. The main problem at the moment was that we claimed it was impossible for us to relieve any but the fighting troops in the area we were taking over. We said we could replace neither the road nor the railway

labour. The French, on the other hand, insisted that we simply must do so and that the relief could not be considered as complete until we did.

Fortunately at this time I had a good deal to do with General Du Cane, commanding our XV Corps. I had often met him at G.H.Q. and my work had brought me in contact with him on the Somme. This stout, reddish, bald, keen, brown-eyed gunner was extremely able, lucid of mind and speech and very pleasant to deal with. He always understood a situation instantly, and was ready to accept a solution where a slower intelligence would merely have been obstinate. These qualities made him an ideal neighbour to the French. His one disability was that his body lacked the agility of his brain and he did not, I think, believe in exercising either more than was needful.

The intense work entailed by the relief kept me constantly on the move, driving over the frozen roads or walking in the different sectors, and gave me little time during the next few days for anything beyond details; but presently it was borne in upon me, through meetings with officers from the G.Q.G. and others, that a subtle change was becoming noticeable in the relationship between the French and English Commands. It was as if the removal of Joffre had let loose a gradually spreading flood of exigencies and pretensions on the part of major and minor lights at the G.Q.G. which his overwhelming authority had hitherto held in check.

Although nominally co-equal with the other Allied Commanders-in-Chief, none had disputed his position as *primus inter pares*, and all had got used to following the indications he gave with so firm yet so light a hand. He had never, even during the agonizing days of the Marne, attempted to exercise an authority over us which in fact was not his by right.

His requests for co-operation, his proposals, were always couched in terms that could give no offence. A new method was now apparently being initiated and I began to sniff danger. Even in my distant corner I could sense that, far from smoothing down the British General Nivelle and his Staff were somehow rubbing our military authorities up the wrong way.

Our people were becoming supersensitive for a number of reasons. They were not prepared to admit for a moment that General Nivelle had succeeded to the authority his predecessor had won for himself when the British Army was still but a tiny fraction in the

great French array. They were only willing to deal with him as co-equals. General Nivelle failed to perceive that so junior and so new a commander would have to be specially careful in dealing with an officer senior to himself like Sir Douglas Haig. What caused irritation at this stage I do not know, but there were plenty of signs that the hackles of G.H.Q. were gradually rising. Its first contacts with General Nivelle were making it restive.

The fact was that the British Army had come of age on the Somme. It had outgrown and was becoming impatient of French tutelage, and even had Joffre remained in power there would have been trouble had this not been recognized. My belief is that the wise old leader would have realized this and curbed his Staff, who were certain to be less ready than himself to accept this new factor; he would have admitted that Great Britain's growing power entitled her to the greater weight in the councils of the Alliance which her soldiers claimed for her.

The impression that the British commanders were not receiving full support from Mr. Lloyd George, which had penetrated even to the low strata where I moved, increased the tendency of all British soldiers in contact with the French to assert themselves. A propensity, never quite absent, to criticize all things French was a symptom of this, and our people, generally quite content with the inward feeling of their own superiority, began to allow some signs of this atavistic conviction to appear, by implication at least, in conversations with Frenchmen.

It was not long before a marked and growing rivalry, hitherto absent, became perceptible between the two General Staffs, and this was very difficult to check or counteract. The French began to feel that their early efforts, when they had borne the brunt of the war, were being forgotten, and that as the claims and pretensions of their allies grew in proportion to their own diminishing strength, they would find themselves helpless and deprived of all influence when the time came for the final great settling of accounts between the nations. Their apprehensions were perceived on our side and misconstrued. They were assumed to be wearing a chip on their shoulders for no accountable reason, and this caused irritation. A conversation I had at the time with two British officers in responsible positions, both in frequent contact with the French, exemplified the feelings that were beginning to prevail. Their point of view was that the French were unreliable and, like spoilt children, required

humouring. They asserted that one of the guiding principles of French policy was to make sure they won the war themselves while they kept us playing second fiddle.

Knowing the French better than these men, and certainly having seen more of them in circumstances where character counts, I stoutly opposed this thesis. I was right as far as the army was concerned. The French Army was neither self-indulgent nor egotistic: on the contrary, an intense sense of patriotism subjugated self-interest in officers high and low, and checked the rather personal view regrettably prevalent elsewhere.

Personal friendships and considerations of loyalty sometimes played a part with us even in such important matters as appointments to commands. This was not so amongst the French, where with few exceptions the rule was the complete elimination of all personal considerations in the higher interests of the State. But my friends were not entirely wrong, as I afterwards discovered, in their judgment as applied to French politicians, who were undoubtedly, then and later, somewhat apprehensive of the growing might of Britain.

As their uneasiness in this respect developed, so also grew their anxiety lest we should fail to develop our maximum strength against the common enemy. As is so often the way in human affairs they were caught in a contradiction; the desire to see us strong always outweighed vague apprehensions concerning the future. Nevertheless this *arrière pensée* did at times tend to create a lack of frankness from which the relations between the two countries suffered. We were in fact entering into a bad period, which was to culminate in 1918 when Clemenceau gave as his watchword *Il faut parler en maître aux Anglais*. Happily we did not know this, or the war might never have been won. The outward and visible manifestations of this maxim, as far as they penetrated to us, were assumed to be expressions of that terrible old man's bad temper.

There was one cause of friction that, living amongst the French, I was perhaps more aware of than most of our people: the sensitiveness due to the fact that the war was being waged on their soil. Stories of German brutalities in occupied territories kept reaching them. All knew that French civilians, men and women, had to salute German officers, and I was soon to see for myself how the conquerors had broken the spirit of the unfortunate French they had ruled. The French Army knew these things and, although they were seldom

alluded to, no-one living amongst them could fail to realize how acutely they suffered in their innermost feelings.

The result, a very natural one, was that the French were very thin-skinned concerning all questions of control over their own territory. Consequently any action on the part of an Englishman which savoured of high-handedness towards civilians, any gesture reminiscent of the attitude of a conqueror in occupied territory, was violently resented. To many Frenchmen the sight of part of their country in enemy hands, and of allies, however well-intentioned, exercising some measure of authority over another part, was exasperating.

That they could not openly resent the presence of foreigners fighting their cause exacerbated this feeling. The French as a whole were in the position, as far as we were concerned, of a man tolerating for ulterior reasons the long-drawn-out visit of tiresome relatives.

Even knowing the French as I did, I never fully realized until the end of the war how irksome the presence of so many allies on their soil was to them. It came to me as somewhat of a shock when a French officer, a very great friend of our country, explained to me what an intense feeling of relief it would give him to see the last of us, when France and American-filled Paris would at last be French again. At first I was hurt and thought this ungrateful, but presently I understood what a humiliation it had been to have so many foreigners, richer, who had suffered so much less, so many of whom tended to behave as masters, swarming all over the country. Some newcomers, especially the unimportant ones, had, it was all too evident, proved very high-handed in their methods.

Although many of our officers exercised the most amazing tact and restraint, the feelings of the French in this respect were never grasped by our army as a whole, and, as was to be expected now that our forces amounted to hundreds of thousands of men, countless French corns were trodden on every day.

When any attempt was made to make our people aware of the reasons for French sensitiveness, the retort as likely as not would be 'What nonsense, jolly lucky to have us fighting for them'. This attitude led to bad feeling, for the French, when they became aware of it, would at once react as they always do to what they consider the most exasperating trait in our national character, a high moral pose assumed to disguise practical interests. 'Sanctimonious'



and 'hypocritical' were words that would at once flash to their minds even if they did not spring to their lips.

Were we really fighting for *les beaux yeux de la belle France*, or because our sea power had been challenged and we had to save our own honour and our own skin, they would ask with a shrug.

The resentment felt in our army at the continued assumption by the French Command that we were still under its tutelage has been alluded to. This infinitely delicate matter had, so to speak, both a material and a moral side. The material side was purely a question of weight and numbers. We were certainly important enough, with our three million men in the field on all fronts, to stand on our own feet. Quite apart from the merits of this particular case, the moral aspect of the problem was complicated by the French belief, that they possessed, as it were by divine right, a pre-eminence and a right to leadership on land, just as the Bourbon Kings, simply because they were Kings, were entitled to call themselves the eldest sons of the Church.

This attitude was galling and made it difficult for us to concede to the French a superiority which we had naturally admitted when our army was very small, and which was difficult to deny them while we were still guests on French soil. It was impossible not to admit that they were masters in their own country and must have the first place amongst the armies fighting there.

#### CHAPTER IV

### GENERAL NIVELLE: FRENCH AND BRITISH

I SAW General Nivelle at his headquarters a few days after his return from London. He wished to have from me a personal report on the reliefs. He was in the highest spirits, but his visit to England, in spite of his conviction to the contrary, had done him harm.

He had gained the impression that he could bend the politicians to his will and override the military advisers of his allies when he chose by appealing over their heads to their political chiefs. At the same time his frequent exposition of his proposed method to all and sundry bound him to it more and more, and made it increasingly difficult for him to modify it should he desire to do so; this fact may have had a greater share in his ultimate decision than anyone will ever know.

He received me and another British officer senior to me, seated at his desk in a large room. Our chairs were drawn up to either side of the desk. He turned full towards us, his face lit by the cold, hard, winter light. As he leant back to speak I was again struck by the pleasant impression he made. His earnest, straightforward look gave one confidence, and as he spoke one could not but be impressed by his power of clear exposition. He expressed himself with the greatest lucidity, and I thought that, even for a Frenchman, he was a fluent talker.

After listening to my report, he said how pleased he was at having obtained two more divisions from England. This he evidently looked upon as a personal achievement. 'Sixty-four British divisions in France,' he said, 'that is splendid.' He then plunged straight into the delicate question of G.H.Q.'s cherished plan to clear the Belgian coast because of the submarine menace. It was an obsession: '*C'est une idée fixe*,' he said. I trembled lest he should put into words the thought that had troubled me for some time: that British soldiers, unconsciously perhaps, specially favoured this operation because it would be entirely removed from French interference; but if he shared my impression he made no sign.

What he said was that to clear the Belgian coast was purely a local operation, so far removed from the main attack that there the

British would derive little advantage from the great combined main effort farther south. Moreover the danger would be in no way removed if the whole coast fell into our hands, it would only be 'pushed back'. 'The Admiralty cannot really contend that to drive the submarines a little farther east will materially change the situation as far as they are concerned; they cannot take the responsibility of making the war drag on for another year for so meagre an object.'<sup>1</sup>

It was evident that he knew how hypnotized our G.H.Q. was by the idea of the coastal operation, for, leaning forward on the table, emphasizing each word by tapping with his outstretched hand, he repeated: 'To drive the Germans a little way off is no good.' Then, with great emphasis: 'You must destroy them, smash their strength.'

He looked at us keenly as if to make sure he had made his point, then went on to say in a more conversational tone that in his opinion to make the attack on the coast our main objective implied that the war must last another year, since the effect of such an operation could only be felt in 1918. He said that, speaking quite frankly, he thought the French could not last another twelve months, and I, visualizing the wastage and the paucity of reserves, was inclined to agree with him.

He seemed determined to make it clear that he believed the Flanders offensive to be purely a G.H.Q. idea, and at the same time to convey the impression that British Ministers shared his own point of view on the question, for he added casually that the operation on the Belgian coast had been spoken of by Sir Douglas Haig but had not been mentioned by any member of the War Cabinet in London.

He then asked us some questions on matters of precise detail concerning our army, but the Flanders offensive was evidently the one thing that preoccupied him; like a *leit-motif* in an opera it kept recurring irrepressibly in his conversation. Now he was at it again. 'Sir Douglas's plan of carrying out an offensive south of Arras and a main attack at Ypres is unsound. What it will amount to is a purely British operation which will be isolated and so lose the benefit of the French attack.' He on the contrary wished to make the effect of a hundred divisions felt at once.

He went on to say that the War Cabinet had asked him what meaning he gave to the words *bataille décisive*, and that his answer had been that the term had been loosely used; that the result sought, for must depend upon the means employed, that in fact no 'decision'

<sup>1</sup> Nivelle was right. The submarines' range was such that the Belgian ports were not indispensable to the Germans.

could be hoped for unless decisive means were employed. Sensible words, with which the British Staff would certainly have agreed, and to which General Nivelle would have done well to adhere.

At this point my companion, who knew French well but not perfectly, made what seemed to me a serious blunder. He told the Commander-in-Chief, or rather conveyed the impression, that there was some jealousy at G.H.Q. concerning the tasks allotted to the French and British Armies respectively under his plan; the British were merely to carry out a holding attack, the French were to break through and the main reward would necessarily fall to them.

Now frankness is an excellent thing, and personally I found it the wisest policy always to tell the French candidly of any difficulty that arose. But this was a different matter. To express a feeling that should not have existed at all amounted to voicing one of those thoughts which cross the mind of everyone sometimes, but are in shame promptly suppressed.

It was indeed an unworthy idea that questions of prestige should be allowed to influence decisions affecting the vital matter of ending the war as rapidly as possible. The only question deserving consideration was how each could best co-operate to that end. Nivelle's plan had been accepted for better or worse by the supreme authority in such matters, the Government; there was nothing to be done but to accept it loyally and banish all discreditable doubts. Only one thing mattered, and that was to bend every energy to make it succeed, which was in fact what the British did when it came to the point, straining every nerve to carry out the rôle assigned to them.

As the purport of my colleague's words dawned on me I was seized with such a feeling of panic that the sweat broke out on my forehead. I watched General Nivelle with considerable alarm.

The inevitable happened. He jumped in his chair. '*Comment?*' he shouted, and banged the desk with his fist: 'What is that you say?'

My companion, by this time anything but happy, repeated haltingly what he had said. General Nivelle burst out. Under the influence of anger he revealed the resentment I was alarmed to see he felt against the British Commander-in-Chief. He could not but notice, he said, that Sir Douglas attached undue importance to matters of prestige and was lacking in that spirit of co-operation without which work between allies was so difficult; he did not visualize the front as a whole and in fact was always trying to draw all the blanket to himself.

This outburst had very little to do with what my companion had said. Unfortunate as had been his words and justified as was General Nivelle's displeasure at hearing them, his attack on Sir Douglas showed a volume of pent-up annoyance and even of anger that was very disquieting. We both felt deeply this criticism of our leader and were amazed at the depth of feeling that could prompt the French Commander-in-Chief thus to criticize the British Commander-in-Chief in front of two comparatively junior English officers. It was a most embarrassing situation. In other circumstances the proper thing to do would have been to walk out, but the French Commander's irritation was too justified to warrant any such action. A childish point of view had been put forward by us, we had laid ourselves open to exactly what we were getting; the only thing to do was to sit through it. Neither of us liked it, nor probably looked as if we did. We both felt, as we found out when we compared notes later, that General Nivelle's tirade showed more than the resentment of an angry man; it was the reflection of the changed mentality at the G.Q.G., that of the 'new' men, the Staff imported by General Nivelle himself, who were already creating an atmosphere which might soon have dangerous repercussions. Nerves had already become tense under the new régime.

But if my companion and I, as we subsequently discovered, had the same reaction to General Nivelle's words, we were at the moment neither in a position to compare notes nor able to end the interview as we both fervently wished we could.

General Nivelle was going on, a note of exasperation now in his voice. Throwing up his arms he exclaimed: 'I am willing to give all the honour and glory to the British, all of it. They can have it. All I care for is to win the war this year. It must be won.' After a pause he went on more calmly, but still as one developing an argument to people previous experience had shown to be obstinate and hard to convince. A plaintive tone was discernible as his voice lifted at the end of his sentences. 'The holding attack will be no less glorious than that of the manœuvring army. At St. Privat, Moltke and the King of Prussia stood in the centre all day. This was where the holding attack took place, and it was evidently the most important part of the line in their eyes. And who can say that the German line may not give way on the British front thanks to French pressure elsewhere?' . . . 'The holding attack can only take place on the Somme front,' he added, 'for there the enemy has concentrated his forces.'

He broke off for a moment, his voice now normal, to speak of the extension of the British front to the Roye Road, which must, he said, be completed by the end of February. In no case could it be allowed to drag on beyond the first week in March. Then, with a small movement of irritation, he returned to the point which had evidently given him so much annoyance.<sup>1</sup>

He was quite willing to let the British Army play any part it liked in the East or elsewhere, but in London the plan he had suggested had been accepted as being the best. The idea of extending the British front instead of taking a larger share in the offensive had been welcomed. Sir William Robertson had even adduced as a reason for doing so the fact that some of our divisions could not, owing to lack of training, be trusted in open warfare.

This struck me as very unlikely and completely absurd, for our divisions, however untrained in open warfare, were no more handicapped in this respect than were the French.

After the war, my diary in hand, I asked Sir William Robertson if he had said anything of the sort, and he denied ever making such a remark. What he may possibly have said to our Ministers was that he preferred to extend the British front rather than allow British troops to participate in an offensive he did not believe in, and a garbled version of what he said may have reached Nivelle. Some highly placed person perhaps talked a little too much, nothing unusual in that.<sup>2</sup>

There was a pause. General Nivelle was evidently trying to think of the most convincing arguments to place before us. He was determined to make an impression on us that we would pass on. He was thoroughly roused and disquieted.

'You must remember,' he said presently, 'that the British attack at Arras will only have to last eight days at the outside, more probably

<sup>1</sup> There seems to have been some ground for General Nivelle's anxiety. Although the relief was carried out in time, the correspondence from G.H.Q. was reticent and pessimistic on this subject as well as on that of the date of the offensive.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that General Nivelle had got muddled as to the source of this information. On December 23rd in reply to a letter from General Nivelle, des Valières, Head of the French Mission at G.H.Q., sent a most unfortunate telegram to his Commander-in-Chief purporting to reproduce a statement made by Sir Douglas Haig that day. In its course he stated that six of the British divisions were 'of very mediocre value', a phrase possibly to some extent true, but altogether incredible in the mouth of the British Commander-in-Chief. Nevertheless, as Sir Douglas must have said something upon which des Valières based his message, it is possible he remarked that these divisions lacked training for open warfare. This telegram was taken by the French to London where it was translated. Mr. Lloyd George had a copy and quotes it as having been sent by Sir Douglas Haig, who had never seen it. It is possible that Sir Douglas may have seen a copy of it later in London.

three. The French manœuvre will by then have relieved it; and I beg of you,' he went on, 'to make it your business to counteract these rumours of jealousies between Commanders. There are none. Treat with ridicule the idea that the choice of objective, the allocation of tasks, is influenced in any way by other than purely military reasons. Prestige and all that nonsense have nothing to do with it.'

He repeated this again and again. 'You who are liaison officers must hunt down these pernicious theories which can do incalculable harm. Tell your compatriots,' he said, '*que je donnerai toute la gloire à l'Armée anglaise.*'

We took our leave. As we did so I seized the opportunity of thanking him for the excellent work the Tenth Army had done before handing over to our troops; the sectors we were taking over were in first-class condition. He acknowledged this by a personal compliment. 'You speak very good French. Is your mother French as mine is English?' No, I answered, I could boast of no French blood. '*Tant pis,*' he said, 'but you are bilingual all the same.'

He followed us to the door. His annoyance had passed, but his preoccupation remained. Under the broad hint he had been given I felt certain he now sensed the hankering of the British Command for a theatre of their own. This was the real lure of the Belgian coast. These thoughts were not expressed, but he said suddenly, after bidding us good-bye for the second time, 'Remember, under my plan it is the British who will clear the Germans out of Belgium. *C'est vous qui prendrez la Belgique.*' And I thought, as I saluted, that General Nivelle was no fool.

This conversation I have never forgotten. I pondered it then, I have often pondered over it since. To what extent did these questions of prestige influence operations? What part did they *really* play in the eventual decision to launch the great offensive in Flanders in the autumn? None can say; I have never been able to come to any definite conclusion, and indeed no conclusion is possible, for it is a question of what the French call *les impondérables*. A personal impression alone remains.

As I walked out, I asked my companion anxiously if there was any specific cause for the evident strain between the two Commanders-in-Chief which General Nivelle's words and manner made evident. Nivelle had made it plain that he considered he had reason to feel

hurt at Sir Douglas's attitude, and also in a subtle way that he sensed some hostility against himself at British G.H.Q.<sup>1</sup>

The answer I received was that there was nothing specific, that our people were carrying on just as usual, but that on the other hand the new arrivals at the G.Q.G. were showing signs of being dictatorial and overbearing, and that this would certainly lead to serious trouble of which there were already signs. 'Liaison is going to be worse hell than usual,' said my companion. 'Nivelle is all right but Colonel d'Alenson is the ruddy limit.'

This was not very satisfactory, and it looked as if there were squalls ahead.

Our talk with General Nivelle took place at Beauvais, where the G.Q.G. was newly installed. The Staff offices were in the old Institut Agronomique, inconvenient in the extreme and very inaccessible, being surrounded by narrow and tortuous streets.

The Grand Quartier had come down in the world since under the reign of Joffre it had occupied the charming town of Chantilly, its offices in the superb Hotel du Grand Condé. Beauvais had no more in common with the delightful little racing centre of Chantilly than had the dreary Institut Agronomique, in which the French Staff were now housed, with the hotel in which they had formerly taken their ease. The story of how this building came to be chosen is an epic in itself. The old G.Q.G. at Chantilly had acquired the reputation in political and other circles of being, under its austere exterior, a hive of dissipation and amorous intrigue. Nothing could have been more unjust, for the officers of the G.Q.G. led monastic lives except that they did not all of them practise the virtue of humility. Parliamentary prejudice and pruderies, however, had their way, and at enormous inconvenience and great expense the entire Staff were moved from Chantilly to Beauvais, which was farther from the front and far less suitable.

Here, as accommodation for the offices, there was a choice between an exceedingly good modern college and the Institut Agronomique. For some unfathomable reason the officer in charge of the arrangements chose the older and more inconvenient building. This caused an outcry from the whole Staff, including the Commander-in-

<sup>1</sup> The general impression I gathered subsequently, verified from other sources, was that Sir Douglas Haig and General Nivelle got on quite well when they met; the root trouble at the time lay in the acid correspondence prepared by the two Staffs.



Chief as soon as he arrived; he said the rooms resounded like violins and there were draughts like jets of icy water; but what really exasperated him was the fact, suddenly realized when he noticed the statue of the reverent founder in the courtyard, that he was in a Catholic institution. This was too much. The Chamber of Deputies was sure to say he was flirting with the Catholic Right. So loud and persistent were the grumbles from all concerned that it seemed at one moment as if the lumbering mass of the G.Q.G. would have to be moved again; but General Nivelle, no doubt gaining comfort from the fact that he was well known to be a Protestant, and that this had probably played its part in his appointment, and perhaps fearing ridicule more than gossip, decided to remain.

Visiting both the Grand Quartier Général and our own General Headquarters fairly frequently, I often amused myself by comparing their points of resemblance as well as their differences.

They were alike in their dreariness. The towns on which they descended seemed to be deprived of light, air and *joie de vivre*. Shrouded in a thick veil of mysterious secrecy, people moved about the police-haunted streets with faces as expressionless as barn doors. The miasma generated by the ceaseless vigilance of eyes and ears always watching and listening for the spy and the informer hung heavily over the restricted space, hemmed in by guards, examining-posts and gendarmes, who scrutinized the papers of all who would enter. In both places a large number of hard-working officers spent drab lives, harnessed to what was in most cases monotonous toil, for an endless number of hours without any relief whatsoever. There was little movement in the dreary empty streets, only awakened occasionally by the roar of a great car as some liaison officer sped on his duty. The restricted civil population, caught in the military net, flitted about silently when forced to leave their houses.

But the towns that contained the two Headquarters were in complete contrast to each other. Beauvais, dominated by its magnificent cathedral, imposing and proud, had always been conscious of its history. The statue to Jeanne Hachette in the big square was there to remind all of the time when, loyal to the king, the burghers and their wives had fought desperately against the men of Burgundy under Charles the Bold.

Montreuil, where British General Headquarters was stationed, was indifferent to its past. It was too sleepy to remember. Nothing

made much impression on its crooked, wayward, independent little streets and squares. Perched high on a hill, it was the haunt of artists in peace-time, but to me it will always be associated with the unprepossessing atmosphere of soap, cold water, blue chins recently shaved, and porridge for breakfast eaten by lamplight. Such memories predominate over all others, even over that of the thousands of nightingales that haunted the ramparts in summer, setting up such a concert that their lovely individual songs merged into a cacophony.

Beauvais and Montreuil were not only the brains of their respective armies; they bore, when one came to think of it, a considerable resemblance to the ordinary human cerebrum, for only a small section of each was given up to the production of ideas; the greater part was ceaselessly employed on routine work, just as most of the cerebral convolutions are engaged in dealing with the ordinary functions of the human body, such as breathing and digesting.

In one respect the two Headquarters were exactly alike; they shared in an equal degree a rapacious and insatiable appetite for foreign decorations, and thought nothing of devouring at a sitting the largest batch sent by an allied government. By the time they had helped themselves there was not much to spare for the fighting troops. But even the largest rations of stars, orders and crosses hardly served to lighten the gloom for more than a day or so; afterwards each headquarters would resume, as far as the outer world could see, its usual expression of glumness, bearing on its collective countenance symptoms which in an individual would have been diagnosed as dyspepsia. Moroseness appeared to be the common psychological denominator of both.

The personnel of the G.Q.C. changed more often than ours, for their large body of staff officers enabled them to enforce a rule that brooked no exception, whereby each staff officer before being promoted to a higher grade must serve six months with the fighting troops. But in spite of the breath of fresh air this coming and going should have let in, the atmosphere was as suffocating and oppressive as at our own G.H.Q., where our staff officers were too valuable and too rare to allow of a similar measure being applied. The unavoidable parsimony with which our staff officers had to be used was as bad for the army, which would have benefited in every way from a constant movement between headquarters and the line, as it was

heartbreaking to individuals whose dream it had been to lead troops, but who found themselves tied to office stools during the greatest war in history.

Our General Headquarters had one considerable advantage over the French, in the lack of rivalry between the different departments of the Staff. If shades were perceptible they never materialized into solid impenetrable partitions; the individuality, importance and interdependence of each section were fully recognized.

At Beauvais the hierarchy of the bureaux, and the segregation superimposed by military snobbishness upon different sections of the Staff, tended to subdivide the ponderous G.Q.G. into small hermetically sealed communities.

The Staff were the leaders, the Court nobility so to speak, in the French Army, and they floated as easily and as naturally over the mass of their 'unbrevetted' comrades as oil does above water. They held a position in relation to their Reservist colleagues which was not unlike that of the aristocrats under the old régime towards commoners. Whether they liked it or not (they generally did) they were superior beings belonging to a privileged caste to whom honour (and honours) were due. A Regular Army doctor, for instance, though he had spent the last ten years administering pills and counting chamber utensils, was in the view of the army the unquestioned superior of the most renowned Paris surgeon.

A curious contradiction in the mentality of French staff officers, which I observed time and time again, was that those who professed the utmost disdain for the civilian of intellectual pursuits and who at least by implication respected only physical attributes, themselves owed their pre-eminent position to undoubted intellectual attainments of a very high order.

The Third Bureau or Operations section was the height of military aristocracy; it was more exclusive than the most exclusive club, as inaccessible to common mortals as the *Almanach de Gotha*. The Intelligence was more oncoming, having more dealings with foreigners, and had the friendliness that comes of 'nosiness'. At the other end of the scale, some of the sections amongst the administrative departments gave the impression that they sought protection from the disdainful aloofness of the intellectuals behind the hostile, sometimes snarling, suspicious demeanour often so unfortunately characteristic of the French petty official.

Discipline, never quite cast off between different ranks, had a damping effect on an organization where perforce officers of different ranks worked together cheek by jowl all day long. In fact the G.Q.G. had many of the characteristics of sheltered communities such as schools and monasteries. It undoubtedly possessed a youthful side, due to the secluded life most of the officers had led, to their having been kept together in military establishments when other men entered into hard competitive civil life, but it also concealed latent ambitions and a keen rivalry such as exist, so we are told, amongst the members of celibate religious communities. These were, however, held in check by a high sense of duty to the country in war-time, just as the aspirations of mediaeval monks were sublimated by the fervour of a crusade.

If staff officers of this type had abandoned Joffre, it was not so much for personal reasons as because following him would have meant placing loyalty to a man above their duty to France, and ceasing to give their best to the service of the army.

One French staff officer, whom I greatly admired for his obvious and unflinching rectitude, was at about this time deprived of a post he had filled more than adequately, to be given one of less importance. This meant that another would reap the advantage of work he had been long engaged upon. One day, walking back from the trenches with him down a road, I tried to say very gently how much I deplored his going. He answered: 'It is a crime to allow questions of personal prestige, vanity, or injustice to individuals, to obscure, however slightly, the interest of the nation, and it is to the interest of the nation that even an injustice should pass unnoticed and unchallenged. Besides which there is discipline, that rigid compliance which, shown by the obedience of the body, must be a reflection of the selfless submission of the mind.'

G.H.Q. at the time of which I am writing was much better housed than the Grand Quartier. The elect (G.S., A. and Q., R.A. and R.E.<sup>1</sup>) occupied a well-built infantry barracks with plenty of light and air, some of whose spacious bare rooms had fine views of the country for miles around, while others overlooked a vast square, always full of life and movement caused by the arrival of distinguished visitors, staff officers and messengers. The medical, ordnance and transport

<sup>1</sup> General Staff, Adjutant General, Quartermaster General, Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers.

headquarters staffs were housed at some distance outside the little town.

The atmosphere was depressing, and our Staff did not have the solace and relief their French opposite numbers obtained from a good *cuisine*, for, in accordance with the genius of their race, they managed to live badly and uncomfortably, quite unconscious of the fact that all about them the bourgeoisie whose houses they inhabited fared like kings in comparison with themselves.

Some years after the war, I revisited Montreuil. G.H.Q. had long since departed. The rooms occupied for so long in so many houses by quiet officers who left early and came back late were vacant once more. In each of them the neat white counterpane lay spread on the pitchpine bed as it had always done. In each the big mirror in its wide gold frame, spotless as ever, reflected the window with its heavy muslin curtains edged with coloured valance, and the faded box spray under the small plaster cast of the Holy Virgin. There was really no change, it was in 1928 as it had been in 1917, as it was in fact when the houses were first built under Louis XVI or maybe under Louis Philippe.

I went to a pastrycook's I remembered, and over a cup of indifferent tea asked the pretty young woman behind the counter what were her memories of the time when the British were in the town; but she had been a child then, she said, and had not even a recollection of the days when busy staff officers hurried by, nor of the tall military policemen. It dawned on me then that the subdued, tense atmosphere of G.H.Q., in which so many men had lived for so long, can hardly have been perceived by the townspeople, nor could a particle of the icy weight of responsibility for the conduct of the war, which had seemed to us to press down on the life of the little town, have so much as touched their shoulders. In face of the stresses and emergencies that had dominated our lives, they had gaped for a moment, then, not attempting to understand, had said with a shrug—'*C'est la guerre*' and turned each one to his own tiny interests, long since adjusted to war conditions.

When the English left, the town resumed its sleepy business as it had done after so many other forgotten wars. The years droned by, falling slowly one by one into the well of the past, where events lie mingled and time is foreshortened. The War of the Nations lay there together with the old dynastic conflicts, and the citizens

thought and spoke no more of the one than of the others. It made me rather sad, and led me to reflect, as I have often done since, how little lasting impression the British soldier makes on the people amongst whom he is quartered. Guyenne, Normandy, Aquitaine, what trace of our occupation of those provinces remains? No sign of our long hold of Gascony: few know that the great towers watching over La Rochelle harbour were built by us; no trace of the English in Calais. At St. Pol the accidental discovery during the war of a superb set of glass engraved with the crest of a British cavalry regiment led to my finding that we had occupied the place for months at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Not an inhabitant knew. In the depths of the Bordeaux country there are places where they call a *maison a Huuse*, and in Saintonge they call the peaked hats of the women in some villages *Kishno*, little knowing they are commemorating the fact that the Black Prince's men had objected to those same 'Kiss not' hats. Such are the only mementos we have left behind us, their origins long forgotten.

It is one of our national characteristics, this faculty of living in a place, then fading away, unregretted and unremembered. It may be that this is because the British keep so much to themselves, mix so little with an alien race, and take so little sentimental interest in the real life of those amongst whom they are temporarily thrown. Reserved and unobtrusive, they just disappear one day, almost unnoticed by those whose lives their presence affected so little. Perhaps, too, it is that being neither cruel nor inconsiderate there is nothing to remember us by; no one cares to dwell upon having been either defeated or helped. Our men, uninquisitive and detached, preserving their own habits and supremely disdainful of foreign ways, merely passed through the countries they occupied as a shadow passes across the threshold it darkens for a moment but upon which it leaves no trace.

Observing both Englishmen and Frenchmen as they faced the merciless exigencies of the war, one could not but be struck by the fact that in this emergency each tended to act in the character of the other. Strange to say, the feelings of the Englishman concerning the war had their source in his head, whereas those of the Frenchman flowed from his heart. This meant a reversal of the usual psychological process in each, the Frenchman being usually guided by his head, and the Englishman by a complicated mixture of deep-seated

instincts which seem to be seated in his skin, hands, bowels, feet, heart, anywhere in fact but in his brain.

As a result of this inversion of rôles, the Frenchman ceased to count the cost, became reckless, as, bristling, every instinct exacerbated, clinging desperately with tooth and nail to the soil he loved, he threw every ounce of strength, every penny he possessed into the fight against the hereditary foe. It was the struggle of centuries; it was just one more spasm in the long fight against the eternal westward pressure of the Germanic tribes, one more effort to keep them out of the land they have yearned for since the dawn of history.

As happy as a god in France, goes the German proverb; for all I know it may have been coined in Caesar's time.

To the Englishman, on the other hand, the war was a desperate enough struggle, but a passing phase. The German nation had gone mad. Reason showed the danger clearly. The Germans must be taught the necessary lesson, brought to book. After that who could tell? There would be peace again. The German nation would certainly not be our enemy for ever. There might be new balances of power, others might cross our vital interests, and then we would oppose them as we were opposing the Germans now.

Our fighting instinct was not, in spite of appearances, aroused by the Germans in particular; it was directed against anyone who stepped on the stage in the rôle the Germans were filling. In the past it had generally been the French, now it was the Germans. We knew, for history, which to those who can read it is but monotonous repetition, teaches that we had no choice but to pick up a gun and let fly at any nation which has the presumption to attempt to gain domination in Europe. That was all, and very tiresome it was; dangerous too, for our opponents, towards whom after all we were only assuming the rôle of a policeman, fired back at us. Would these tiresome foreigners never keep quiet and learn sense?

Fatalists and gamblers, but detached, taking because farther away a wider view, we were more interested in what might be going on beyond the horizon of the seas surrounding our island than in the crawling quarrelsome pit of Europe: it was impossible that our vision should be as closely focused on a narrow field as was that of the French, who could perceive but one object, France, the one and only land, impossible to improve upon, in which to live was bliss, to be exiled from the worst of punishments.

All this is not to say that we were not very much annoyed indeed with the Germans. Whole sections of the population were even angry with them. We were concerned, sometimes a little frightened. We admitted they were good fighters and respected them for it, but what united our entire population was a feeling of exasperated disgust with them for breaking so many of the rules we fondly imagined governed the game of war, though few of us ever felt the concentrated hatred aroused in French breasts against the nation they knew was bent upon exterminating them as a free people.

We never quite grasped, I am not sure we grasp now, the fact that a nation fighting for its life will have no more scruples than a cornered rat. We never understood that the Germans had far more to gain by beating England than by conquering France, nor did it occur to us that France was nothing more than an obstacle to their real objective. It was our commerce, our colonies that tempted Germany, above all our place in the world. She can hardly have desired to create yet another Alsace-Lorraine by annexing one more slice of France, or to include within her border yet more of the unabsorbable Poles.

Why did we not take in these things? Probably because thinking such a policy unrealizable and never having been invaded and brought to our knees, we were never moved, never roused to the very centre of our beings as were the French.

The French and British points of view, fundamentally different from each other, permeated the two armies, from the trenches to the G.H.Q.'s. Uneducated men merely felt what the thoughtful officers reasoned out, but it came to the same thing, the men of the two nations reacted to the war in totally different ways.

The Englishman, acknowledging duty to God and King, felt he was engaged in a necessary but horrible ordeal for precious if vague things set against an ideological background reflecting such words as democracy and freedom (too real to be fully appreciated), and was otherwise, as far as local conditions allowed, as good-tempered as usual, free-handed, easy-going and casual, whereas the French soldier, long-suffering, patient of everything but injustice, was hard, hard to himself and to others, and harsh in money matters, as only the French peasant can be. He was more generous of his blood than of his *sous*.

In the last analysis the fundamental difference between the two



nations remained to the end of the war, keeping them on much the same footing as two individuals condemned to carry through an unpleasant business together.

The lack of complete understanding was due to the fact that the thousand and one tendrils put out by individuals of either nation did not generally find support or encouragement to grow, when they came into contact with the uncongenial wall of national prejudice encasing the majority of both Frenchmen and Englishmen. Why was this? The men of both nations cared enough for national honour and for liberty to die for them. They both prized justice and respected the same virtues. The same crimes were abhorrent to both. Racially the men of northern France did not differ greatly from the English; as for the Bretons, they were Celts like the Welsh, the Irish and the Highland Scots. Both nations possessed courage in so high a degree that any individual exception to this common virtue evoked uncomprehending and disdainful amazement. Both had noble traditions, a magnificent literature, the roots of their culture were buried deep in the same soil, yet the moulds of France and England turned out individuals of very different kinds.

In history they had been bitter rivals, and the shadow of the past was so misleading that time and again it distorted the reality of the present. It was as if the French, although glad enough to have British support, could never quite forget how difficult it had once been to drive them out of France, nor the British that their nearest neighbour had been their almost constant enemy throughout the ages.

The Englishman, looking at the Frenchman and noting the difference between them, thanked God he was British, and the Frenchman, going through the same process, was grateful to providence that the beautiful and gentle land of France was his *patrie*. Each remained firmly persuaded of his superiority, the one because he was French, the other because he was English. The Frenchman's supreme confidence in his own higher intelligence and culture never faltered, while the Englishman's faith in himself remained unassailed and unassailable, because he felt in all humility that, although he was entirely without pretensions himself, in some way he would not bother to analyse but of which he was as certain as of a Bible truth, he in particular and the men of his race in general were somehow of a higher essence than foreigners.

Each was apt to think he was upholding not his cause but that of,

his country when he became involved in the myriad little clashes of daily contact. The obscure officer who disputed with the French over the allocation of a village to his unit in a billeting area felt he was upholding the cause of England; the Frenchman who insisted on carrying away railway points when he handed over a zone to the British, that he was defending the rights of France; the village mayor imposing petty restrictions in his tiny domain, that he was supporting the dignity and integrity of the Republic.

Language, if not a complete barrier, was a clumsy conveyor of ideas and often a misinterpreter of meaning. Successful contact depended largely upon the temperament of the individual, the Englishman starting from a basis of mild and not unfriendly indulgence and amusement, the Frenchmen inclined to be suspicious. This was not a springboard likely to fling men of either nation into the deep waters of each other's affections; nevertheless intercourse and on occasion mutual admiration made them friends, though quite simple misunderstandings were apt to arise from French stand-offishness being translated as unfriendliness, and British casualness as studied bad manners. When this happened each nationality reverted to its age-long feeling towards the other, the English proud, more disdainful than antipathetic, the French more antipathetic than either proud or disdainful.

It is all too evident that centuries of peaceful intercourse will be needed to achieve what even the common suffering of the war failed to accomplish, a capacity to view a given situation from the point of view of the man of another nationality. To do so calls for a degree of education, knowledge and imagination that the men of the war generation did not possess. To the very end any mannerism, any habit, any form of behaviour, in fact anything that varied greatly from what the men of either nation were used to, seemed rather absurd, and being absurd prevented their even wishing to grasp what kind of creature was concealed in the uniform of a different colour from their own. That a Frenchman should kiss a lady's hand would make an Englishman think he was effeminate and far too supple-backed, or if another kind of Frenchman tucked his napkin in his collar that he was vulgar, while the Frenchman, noting the Englishman's more direct and often casual manners, would put him down as uncivilized, and each would conclude he was very unlikely to get on with such a fellow.

Prejudice was stronger than actual experience, and preconceived ideas continued to bias perception.

## CHAPTER V

### THE BRITISH TAKE OVER

AFTER my interview with General Nivelle at Beauvais, I went to the French XVIII Corps to make arrangements for their relief by the British. It was intended that they should go into camp at Crèvecœur for training. I was very glad to be once more in contact with these good people from Bordeaux and Gascony, of whom I had seen much during the retreat and later in Artois. The officers gave me a great reception; they also produced a sergeant whose story greatly interested me. He had just escaped from the enemy, having been captured in the preceding August. He had got away in the following manner.

At the camp in which he was interned there was a Jewish Landsturm man who turned an honest penny by helping prisoners to escape. His charge was the comparatively modest sum of 500 francs.

The other prisoners, French and Belgian, collected 400 francs for the sergeant, and the balance of 100 francs was promised. This was not good enough for the Landsturm man; other Gentiles had abused the confidence of this son of Israel; six already had been conveyed to the frontier, most had promised to send money, none had paid. This hundred francs remained a problem, but eventually by means of smuggled letters a French Consul in Holland was informed and he managed to send the money to the Jew's wife.

After that all was plain sailing. The Frenchman was given a German soldier's uniform and a regular forty-eight hours' furlough. The German took the train with him to the Dutch frontier, where the Frenchman handed back his uniform. There appeared to have been no difficulties in crossing, and the German remained long enough to buy a considerable amount of smuggled goods. It seems that this trade in smuggled goods was known to the camp authorities who encouraged it.

On the way to the frontier the two men had whiled away the time by discussing what would be the fate of the Landsturm man were he caught. Ten years he would get, that was all, he asserted, and remission at the end of the war, perhaps. Evidently worth it.

The sergeant told me that the Germans in the interior were really

very short of food, and that he had often seen men on guard faint from weakness. True or not, this cheered us. He also said that the Dutch were terrified of a German invasion.

After leaving the XVIII Corps I went on to Clermont to report myself for my new duties at the G.A.N.

The Chief of Staff, Colonel Desticker, received me with the greatest kindness. I was to have the pleasantest relations with him. He was a spare man, with a short crop of brown hair *en brosse*; his narrow, bare-templed, bony brown face had something of the dachshund that was very pleasant, but his eyes were enigmatic, the colour of troubled sea-water. They disquieted me and kept me guessing until in time I realized he was completely dependable and, although reserved, absolutely straightforward and frank. He never had anything up his sleeve. In fact this equable, even-tempered gunner was an ideal man to work with and for. He introduced me to every member of the Staff, many of whom have since achieved distinguished careers.

Then came the moment I rather dreaded, when I was to be presented to the General commanding the Group of Armies. I had not seen General Franchet d'Esperey since the time I had been attached to his Army, the Fifth, during the Battles of the Marne and the Aisne. I had always admired and respected him as a great leader, for I had seen him infuse his indomitable vigour into the dispirited force General Lanrezac had led southwards during the long retreat after Charleroi; but there had been difficulties and a good many minor occasions of friction between French and British during the time I had spent with his Army, and I was doubtful of my reception. All apprehension was however removed as soon as I saw him. He advanced towards me with outstretched hands, his face wreathed in smiles, and greeted me as an old friend.

From that moment he was kindness itself, characteristically bustling and a little brusque, but considerate and courteous. Only now and then a gleam in his eye reminded one of the formidable martinet who had driven his Army forward on the Marne.

I concluded that his terrible sternness of those days had been deliberately assumed as part of the necessary equipment of the commander of a very weary force, depressed by retreat, from which an immense effort must be demanded. General Franchet d'Esperey was a great commander; and not the least of his achievements, it



(top) THE HAPPY WARRIOR  
(bottom) VIVE LA POLITIQUE



seems to me, was to have been able to adapt his personality to the requirements of a great emergency.

In those January days, almost entirely taken up with the harassing work of the relief, I had every reason to be grateful that the Fourth Army, thoroughly broken during the Somme to working with the French, was at the point of junction of the Allied front.

The problems confronting its Commander and his Staff were not easy ones.

The Fourth Army was to have extended its front by 18,000 yards according to the original plan, giving it a front of 35,000 yards, to be held by thirteen divisions in front line and only three in reserve. Now the front it was to take over had been almost doubled, and although the Fifth Army to the north had extended southwards, it was to find itself at the end of the relief with only twelve divisions to hold a front of 54,000 yards. The result was a very thin line, practically no reserves and no opportunity for training or relief. The total British front now comprised one hundred and ten miles, about as far as from London to Nottingham.<sup>1</sup>

Everyone, or nearly everyone, did his best to make the gigantic relief run smoothly, but, as is the way, it is not those who gave no trouble who are remembered but rather those who focused attention on themselves by being obstructive. One man in a hundred proving tiresome or stupid was often enough to hold up the work for a considerable time and give me inordinate anxiety.

It was not my first experience of reliefs on a big scale. When the Germans attacked Verdun in 1916, and the French Tenth Army had to be relieved in Artois in bitter winter weather in the minimum of time, whole divisions had at times been mislaid. It had all been very trying, but the present relief, covering a large area in depth as well as in length, was infinitely more difficult since the material was so much more complicated than it had formerly been; it has aroused my enduring sympathy for anyone whose misfortune it is to be engaged in the removal business, but no firm can ever have undertaken so vast a job. Hutments, camps, railways and tramways, hospitals, dumps of all kinds, had to be removed or handed over, not to mention the actual trenches, back defence areas and all the enormously valuable material accumulated on scores of square miles of military territory.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix V (page 536).



Typical of an almost daily experience of this period, I have a note in my diary that on one occasion, just as I had reached the H.Q. of an artillery commander who had sent out an S.O.S. about some difficulty or other, I was tracked down by a motor-cyclist with an urgent message from the Quartermaster General's department of the Fourth Army which stated that the French were walking off with the railway lines in the particular area they were then evacuating, and what was I going to do about it? On investigation it turned out that only some spare material and technical equipment were being removed; but alarms of this sort or another constantly occurred.

In the case of the French Third Army, the innumerable contacts by which one Army keeps in touch with another had to be prepared and attuned to the British diapason, for when the French Tenth Army was withdrawn the Third would be in immediate contact with our Fourth Army. The guns in particular, which would have to flank and protect neighbouring units and answer calls for barrages from French or British, in fact support each other generally, required very special attention and tuition by a puzzling bilingual process in systems as different as the two languages themselves.

Everything was complicated, even the simplest things; inches for example: to express the calibre of a gun, these would have to be translated in the French mind in the first instances into *pouces* (thumbs) and having got so far these 'thumbs' had then to be worked out in centimetres and millimetres. The signal systems and the telephones also presented no small difficulty. There was not much time left over for the infantry which, caked in mud, good-humoured, long-suffering and from long habit used to solving its own problems, could always be relied upon somehow to find a way out of every quandary.

The railways were just then an even greater worry than usual. The worn and battered French rolling stock and the untended permanent ways were always a source of anxiety; the material the railways could transport was forever below the enormous appetite of the armies for shells and equipment, to which had to be added the ravenous roads for which stone had to be brought in great quantities even from the Channel Islands.

The extra strain put on the railway system by the relief, which involved the transport of large bodies of French troops, and also a huge accumulation of munitions of all kinds necessary for the offensive, very nearly led to a complete breakdown. On top of every-

thing else the canals froze, throwing a heavy extra strain on the railways. This not only seriously affected the army, but caused great suffering to the civilians in the army zone. Amiens was so short of coal that in the middle of the month the electricity supply was cut off for some days, and there was such a shortage of bread that the army had to help feed the people; but worse was to come.

On January 26th, without warning, the French stopped all trains save those of supply. This particular stoppage was due to a coal famine. Munitions and troops had been given priority over this essential mineral until now no less than three hundred trains were required to remove the coal accumulated at the pithead, of which the army zone stood in dire need.

Few things could be more perturbing than suddenly to find your transport system paralysed and all your plans and schedules violently upset, and the thought that there was every chance of the same thing occurring in an aggravated form when the offensive was actually engaged, was extremely disturbing. It was on occasions such as these that I most admired Sir Henry Rawlinson. His humour, kindness, tact and responsive comprehension of the difficulties of others were never at fault. He showed these qualities now as he had shown them when during the Somme fighting he had had more momentous questions to consider, when lives and not rails or waggons had been involved in his decisions.

'Rawly', as the army called General Rawlinson, had his moments of ill humour when difficulties occurred, but soon the kindly smile would beam forth again and all would be well. Rawly had a way of floating over and away from his troubles. His silences when he withdrew within himself were good and inspired confidence; but what I admired most in him was the uncomplaining fortitude with which he took hard knocks. There were moments when I knew he had been badly and even unjustly treated, but he never, even by implication, complained. He knew how to give an example of self-effacement and of discipline at bad moments, and were it but for this alone the army should remember his example.

I recall him clearly although he died so long ago. He had a big forehead well plucked by time, which was also tingeing his hair and moustache with grey. Not handsome certainly, high in colour, weather-beaten, with a big formless nose which he had a habit of rubbing when perplexed or pretending to be, and a big mouth, the lower part of the face heavy and rather protruding as was the lower

lip; his eyes, which looked at you keenly, were small, but their gaze was very kindly as he fixed you from under arched eyebrows; and his voice, which had a deep metallic resonance, was very pleasant.

The one trouble, in regard to his relations with the French, was that, although he could be quite firm at a distance, when he was with them, *vive la politesse*, and his affability would lead him into giving undertakings to which it was difficult to adhere. This tendency required watching all the more carefully at the moment because the French, naturally enough, soon forgot how weak the Fourth Army was, owing to its extreme extension, and began to look for support from the British right in Franchet d'Esperey's attack.

This support was of the greatest moment to them; for although General Nivelle expected to obtain the most important result from his main offensive on the Aisne front, the possibility of General d'Esperey's breaking through on the front Roye-Lassigny between the Oise and the Avre with his Armies, the First and Third, was not lost sight of. This attack was to be launched due east in the direction of Guiscard.<sup>1</sup>

We were naturally anxious to do all we could within the limit of our exiguous possibilities to forward this operation and contribute to its success, but we were far too weak to carry out much more than a demonstration. General Rawlinson's bouts of optimism were apt to play ducks and drakes with the rigid economy of effort imposed on his Army by the niggardly means at its disposal. One day he came to see General Franchet d'Esperey and to my horror spoke as if he had unlimited artillery with which to support the French attack. He sailed in, a stick under one arm, waving the other, in a splendid humour due no doubt to the fact that he was going on a few days' leave, which he was to spend hunting the wild boar with the Duke of Westminster near Arcachon. His promises were contrary to everything that had been settled, and were quite unrelated to what was possible. I spent some difficult hours, tables of guns and munitions of the Fourth Army in hand, dispelling the hopes Rawly had so lightly conjured up.

The Staff of the Fourth Army was an exceptionally fine one, picked men in every way, as good to look at as they were to deal with.

General Montgomery, the Chief of Staff, has remained in my mind as one of the handsomest men I have ever met, with the profile of a Greek statue, big, fair, and blue-eyed; a tiny lisp added to his charm.

<sup>1</sup> See Map facing p. 91.

He was efficiency itself, was never ruffled, and had a much more methodical, better-ordered brain than his chief, who absolutely relied upon him. They made a remarkably effective combination, to be compared only, as far as our army was concerned, with General Plumer and his Chief of Staff, Tim Harington.

It was curious how, with few exceptions, it took the two together, a good chief and a good Chief of Staff, dovetailing into each other, to obtain the best results in the war--e.g. Hindenburg and Ludendorff, Foch and Weygand.

The whole of the Fourth Army Staff was modelled on Rawlinson and Montgomery, and they were the most charming of colleagues. They made a perfect team. There was Pitt Taylor in charge of Operations, tall, thin, whose hidden charm was perceptible behind the crooked smile that was wont to break under his equally crooked moustache. He would inevitably come to mind if one had to try to explain that inexplicable product, an English gentleman. Then there was Val Vivian in charge of Intelligence, worried though unruffled, indefatigably computing the enemy's strength. I shall always remember with gratitude the sympathy and understanding they and the others showed me. They all tried to make my none too easy work seem easier, and resisted the temptation to saddle me with responsibility for the shortcomings an ally will always discern in a neighbour.

It was my duty to keep some track of what was happening on the Aisne front, but especially to note the progress made in the preparations of our immediate neighbour, the G.A.N. Any delay there, any hitch, would deeply affect our own plans with which those of Franchet d'Esperey were to synchronize; but perhaps the most interesting part of my work at this time was that connected with the study of the methods to be employed in the forthcoming attack.

Frequently I watched tests and experiments being carried out which were designed to establish how fast the infantry and the supporting guns could be rushed forward in Nivelle's great offensive. In these tests it was found that, with a limited objective, the artillery could not only keep pace with the infantry but was always well ahead of it as regards time. The observation posts were selected beforehand, and every move of the guns fixed on the map.

This was comparatively easy. Immensely more difficult were the arrangements to ensure that the infantry would never be without its protective barrage in its immense uninterrupted forward rush.

Telephone lines had to be laid, ammunition, etc. brought forward, direct and immediate communications between the infantry and the guns organized, both with the batteries that had moved forward and with the heavies that had been left behind in their original positions.

The very intricate and complicated arrangements needed would have been difficult to make, even in good weather and without enemy interference. The necessity of attempting to ensure that they would work under the conditions of the battlefield, when unpredictable casualties would occur, visibility disappear and every telephone line might be cut, required both imagination and resource.

Every known strong point of the enemy, carefully established by aerial photography, was minutely studied and a separate plan for its capture devised. The rate at which the infantry was to advance came in for constant discussion. It was fixed for both the Groupe des Armées du Nord and the Groupe des Armées de Réserve at a hundred metres in three minutes. Basing themselves on the fact that on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme their infantry south of the river, where the Germans had been taken completely by surprise, had rushed forward at the rate of a hundred metres a minute, the French considered this to be a very conservative estimate, especially for the G.A.N., which had less difficult ground to get over than that which faced the troops in Champagne or on the Aisne.

In conformity with the new tactics, the attacking first line divisions were to rush forward for five kilometres. This was considered to be the maximum depth they were capable of attaining in what was in reality one bound (for the passage of troops within the divisions was to take place with practically no halt), so as to reach the German artillery positions in the first dash.

Our Staffs thought these rates excessive. At this period we found that in some small operations we had undertaken, the rate of fifty yards in five minutes for the barrage preceding the infantry waves was none too slow for men advancing over the shell-pocked water-logged ground which all attacks had to face.

For our main attack in the Arras region the infantry of the Third Army was to progress at the rate of 100 yards in four minutes.<sup>1</sup> Each objective was to be methodically attacked by fresh troops, the halt

<sup>1</sup> In the case of the XVII Corps, the barrage was to cover the first 200 yards at the rate of 100 yards in three minutes, then drop to 100 yards in four minutes. In some places the rate for a time was as high as 100 yards in two minutes.

on each line won being in some cases of several hours. This programme was as much criticized by the French for being too slow as theirs was by us for being too fast. They said we were over-cautious, and numerous were the messages I was bidden to convey to my chiefs to the effect that our men would be pounded by the German guns, instead of rushing them before they could do any harm.

The French arguments sounded very convincing. They had absolute confidence in the success of their methods, and as far as I was concerned, their opinion carried additional weight because my memory was seared with the picture of French and British attacking together on the Somme on July 1st, 1916, the British rigid and slow, advancing as at an Aldershot parade in lines that were torn and ripped by the German guns, while the French tactical formations, quick and elastic, secured their objectives with trifling loss. It had been a terrible spectacle. The German artillery, with targets no gunner could resist, neglected the more dangerous but invisible French groups and concentrated on the British. For long minutes this line or that of the many waves succeeding each other was completely invisible in the smoke of explosions a mile long, and when seen again, though showing gaps of hundreds of yards where there had been men before, was perceived to be slowly advancing at the same even pace. As a display of bravery it was magnificent, as an example of tactics its very memory made one shudder; in any case it left a prejudice in favour of rapid movement.

Nevertheless there was reason in the British contention that the French should not base all their initial plans on what occurred on their front on the opening day of the Somme. On that occasion they had secured a complete surprise which it would be unwise to rely on obtaining again, and also the attack had taken place under excellent weather conditions in the middle of the summer.

No French argument could cause the British to alter their point of view and speed up their time-tables; and their doubts concerning the soundness of the French reasoning increased as they noted that growing optimism tended to set ever more distant objectives for the attacking troops.

I was told to point out to the French, when opportunity occurred, that visions of pursuit in open country should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the first essential to the realization of such pleasant fancies must be the capture of the first German position, and that no scheme however bold, no method of progress in the

country beyond, however well thought out, was of the least value if they failed to secure it.

General Rawlinson was particularly worried at what he considered to be the tendency of French G.H.Q. to take it as a foregone conclusion that the very hard shell of the German first line defences would be cracked at the first onslaught. He repeatedly asked me how the French could possibly pound in one bombardment the enormous trench-area to be attacked, with enough certainty to destroy even partially the successive enemy lines and cut the wire defences protecting each of them. I could not answer for anything but the G.A.N. The position there was that they were short, by some twenty batteries of heavy artillery, of the number that would be required for the guns to do their work effectively, and above all within a reasonable space of time, say four days. By now we all knew that any shortage of guns must be paid for in lives. The G.A.N. artillery plan was that the trench artillery should destroy the German first line on the 20-kilometre-long front of attack, allowing one trench mortar for every 33 metres, 660 mortars in all. Apart from the first line there remained 116 kilometres of German trenches to be dealt with; 45 kilometres of these could be enfiladed by the French guns, 71 kilometres could not. It was reckoned that for every metre of enfiladed trench, one and a half shells were required, and double the number for every metre of non-enfiladed trench. This brought up the shells required by the howitzers for the preparation to the enormous total of 241,000, without counting the ammunition required by the very heavy guns to be used against particular strong points, or that for the long-range ones which would have to deal with the enemy heavy guns and communications: nor did this figure include the vast amounts needed for counter-battery work or the astronomical requirements of the field artillery.

All these things I would explain to General Rawlinson, telling him how the dumps were growing and showing him on the maps the artillery plans. He would follow with his finger the development of this or that complicated section of the scheme elaborately set out with a wealth of references, figures and lines on the map, then he would shake his head and say 'The Boche is up to something, all this is very fine and large, but these immense preparations are giving him ample time to do it, whatever it is'. 'He is up to something,' he would repeat. We did not know that Joffre in his retirement was saying the same thing and deploring the fatal lapse of time. He and

Rawly were right. The Boche *was* up to something, but no one guessed at the particular trick he was even then preparing for us with meticulous and silent haste.

Apart from shrewd guesses such as those hazarded by Rawly, which had no more solid foundation than apprehension caused by the fact that the enemy was being made a present of time wherein to do as he liked, we knew little or nothing of what he was thinking or planning. As always, a curtain, impenetrable even to the most piercing gaze, hung over his lines, whereas we had the impression that our plans must stand revealed to his planes by the work we were carrying out, and in this at least we were not mistaken.

As time went by, regretted only by a few, it was spent by our people in grimly going on with preparations nothing would induce them to alter, but their mood was one of growing glumness largely induced by the effervescence of their neighbours the French.

By a curious mental process which I found it hard to analyse, for nothing whatever happened to justify it, some French generals engaged during this period in a kind of outbidding of each other's most optimistic prognostications as regards both the objectives they hoped to reach and the rapidity with which they expected to attain them. These hopes were no doubt fanned by the attitude of the Grand Quartier Général, whose enthusiasm found combustible material at the different headquarters always ready to kindle under the warm rays of the approval of higher authority.

General Mangin was particularly distinguished in this respect and showed signs of being on the way to surpassing even the Commander-in-Chief in his demands for speed.

His attack was now to press on headlong until it reached the Serre, thirty kilometres from the French front line, in pursuance of General Nivelle's idea of a break-through to the north on the general axis Craonne-Guise.

As for the infantry, its rate of advance became the subject of a kind of competition in speed between commanders, each tending to increase the pace at which his troops were to advance.

In this contest General Mangin won easily. He went so far as to lay it down that his infantry, which was to be preceded by two barrages, the first of high explosives 70 to 80 metres ahead, the second of high explosives and shrapnel 150 metres farther forward, was to progress at the very fast pace of 100 metres in three minutes for three kilometres beyond the starting line.



This was too much for General Micheler. He objected that, although this rate might be maintained until the first trenches were captured and the men might even race forward until the whole of the first objective was attained, it could not be kept up for longer. The forward movement of the artillery for the attack on the second objective must take time. The discussion degenerated into a quarrel between the Group and Army Commanders. General Nivelle finally had to intervene. He wanted to pacify the two irate generals yet at the same time do nothing to fetter the dash and speed of which he himself was the high priest. Mangin was told that while the Commander-in-Chief 'rendered homage' to the audacious and aggressive spirit reflected by the plan of the Sixth Army, the possibility of carrying it out integrally was doubted. General Micheler, on the other hand, was asked to increase the speed of the advance and of the operations generally. Both were pacified but neither was pleased.

This bustling activity and all-round 'gingering up', either self-administered or prescribed to subordinates by French commanders, had one inevitable result; it gave the impression that we, who went on with our preparations without fuss or agitation, keeping as near as might be to the time-tables laid down, had gone to sleep. At this time a visit to a French and then to a British Staff recalled a walk round a zoo, where the inmates of the different cages interested the visitor by the diversity of their temperaments and their ways of manifesting them: our people seemed ponderous and deliberate as bears, the French lively as squirrels.

General Duchêne considered it his duty to use me as a stick with which he hoped to poke my lethargic compatriots into activity. He never missed an opportunity of pointing out the importance of hurrying on the reliefs, to which my invariable answer was that these depended not upon the activity we might display in France, but upon the time it would take for divisions to be brought from the East. Ships, docks, railways, distances, were immutable factors, I kept on telling the irascible General, which could be neither expanded nor increased. The last of our divisions would not arrive from Egypt until the end of February, and consequently the relief could not possibly be completed before then.

When, however, I kept being told to hurry up my people, I reminded the General that the real cause of the delay was the re-modelling of the French plan. Those who had decided upon the change must surely have worked out the time it would take to

transport such a vast number of troops so great a distance with a limited number of ships. The date on which our last troops would arrive could hardly be a matter of surprise.

This, however, did not end the matter, for I see from a note in my diary that I was at last goaded into telling General Duchêne that, from my own personal observation of the French preparations, I felt certain they would not be ready to attack until long after our last division had arrived. This was undoubtedly an impertinence but unfortunately it was also the truth.

One subject to which, then as always, I devoted the greatest care and attention, was that of new inventions and tactical formations developed by the French, for I thought they were always a good deal ahead of us in such matters. Strangely enough it was on this question that I generally received the severest raps over the knuckles, for the 'bright ideas' I sometimes peddled used to rouse to outbursts of fury the sleepest and, so I found, the surliest dogs in the most unexpected kennels at G.H.Q. Often I was sent for by some terrifying being ablaze with the medals of forgotten campaigns, and told to mind my own business. Still I persisted, becoming more wary with time, and eventually always endeavouring to get some intermediary authority to sponsor ideas in which I believed. It was my plain duty to draw attention to these innovations, for the French tactics and weapons on the Somme had meant an enormous saving in human life to them. (Although the figures of our casualties and theirs were not strictly comparable, since of set purpose we fought harder and on a wider front than they did, this fact in itself would hardly account for the enormous disproportion in our respective losses: 419,654 British to 184,451 French.)

In particular I always pointed out the advantage the French derived from the fact that they invariably adopted a universal system of training, just as they had a universal system of command. In this I received great support from General Montgomery, who had returned from a tour of French instruction camps greatly struck by what he had seen, but especially by this uniformity of instruction which gave the most excellent results.

One experiment I well remember as an attempt to evolve new tactics based on a new invention. The year before, the French had evolved an original tactical formation, the self-contained platoon largely dependent upon that wonderful contraption the Vivien Bessière, usually known as the V.B. This was a kind of rifle grenade

fired from an ordinary rifle over the muzzle of which a kind of small funnel was dropped. The grenade was placed in the funnel. An ordinary cartridge was fired from the rifle, the bullet passing through a passage in the centre of the grenade which ignited the charge. The grenade itself was propelled by the gases which had driven the bullet. These it compressed as it obstructed the muzzle of the rifle which it covered as it lay in the funnel. It was very accurate and provided the platoon with an effective means of repelling counter-attacks. Thanks to it the platoon became a miniature and complete unit.

This year tracer-bullets were being experimented with. I succeeded in persuading our authorities to allow a party of officers to come and see a field exercise in which they were to be tested with the French equivalent of a Lewis gun. The more favourably to impress them, warm red wine was provided to counteract the chilling effect of the deep snow in which they would have to stand.

These exercises were a very curious sight. In order to keep down the heads of the trench garrisons to be attacked, the men were being trained to fire from the hip as they advanced. The reason why I remember this occasion so well is probably because it was strange and lovely, lovely as some things were during the war, Very lights suspended like brilliant stars from the dark still sky, for instance. The tracer bullets, showing up pink against the snow, made the most beautiful curves and arabesques as they rose high or ricocheted at incredible and fantastic speeds like fireflies in an eastern night.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MORALE OF THE FRENCH ARMY

AT about this time there was much anxiety concerning a possible German attack through Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> There had been persistent rumours of such a possibility towards the end of December 1916. It was feared that the Germans, hemmed in on all sides and unable to carry out an offensive in Russia in winter, would not hesitate to violate Swiss territory if they thought it would pay them to do so.

General Foch had been charged with the study of this contingency. The fears of the French military authorities and of the Government were real enough, but it was a deep humiliation to Foch, who had held such great commands, to be relegated to this task, even though it was understood that he would command the Army which would be created to repel this new invasion should it take place.

Those must have been bitter days for him, and he was entitled to feel deep resentment, for Joffre, who esteemed him highly and was personally fond of him, had, in a rare moment of weakness, thrown him overboard as an offering to Demos just before the storm broke over his own head.<sup>2</sup>

Echoes of the danger of this attack through Switzerland kept reaching the armies. The Intelligence reported that the Germans were buying up all French maps of the Franco-Swiss frontier zone that they could lay their hands on. On January 22nd I was shown a telegram from the French Home Office stating that the Swiss had ordered mobilization for the 24th. The French had decided to give Swiss nationals living abroad every facility for returning home. The quarantine usually imposed was to be dropped save in suspicious cases. It had been feared that the Swiss would stand passively by and allow the Germans to march through their country without opposition; the rumoured mobilization, implying as it did a more bellicose spirit, was therefore very welcome. (General Nivelle, who

<sup>1</sup> See Map on page 441.

<sup>2</sup> Colonel Fabry, Joffre's *Chef de Cabinet*, in his book, *Joffre et son destin*, writes that Joffre said to him, speaking of his sacrifice of Foch, 'At that moment I was certainly mistaken about the truth. I deceived myself or I was deceived. I gave way in a moment of weakness. I was so weary of struggling and so sick at heart.'

was himself greatly worried about this, discussed it with General Cadorna when he visited the Italian front on February 1st.)

There was also talk of possible German attacks in the Nancy sector. This was serious too, for an enemy success in this quarter would have the effect of depriving France of her vital steel-producing area.

What news there was from more distant theatres was disquieting.

There were grave rumours of how the Russians had first ill-used and were now showing every sign of abandoning the Roumanians. Pressure brought to bear on Petrograd in an endeavour to change their attitude was, it was said, very badly received.

Greece was also giving anxiety; Monsieur Briand's apparent indulgence to King Constantine, who was the *bête noire* of the armies, caused much unfavourable comment. There had been incidents in Athens, French sailors had been murdered, there were demonstrations against the Allies, and an ultimatum had been delivered which the Greeks had accepted under the compulsion of the guns of the Allied fleets. These happenings appeared to us distant and nebulous but threatening.

On more than one occasion at this period highly placed officers in our army questioned me concerning the morale of the French troops. The word had got round that the French Army was showing signs of lassitude, that in spite of its fine performance on the Somme in the previous year, and of more recent successes such as the brilliant attack on Douaumont, some units had never got over the strain and the blood-letting of the desperate fighting at Verdun.

This was a matter that had given me considerable preoccupation for a long time past but on which I hated to express an opinion, for nothing could be more difficult or more delicate. To my chiefs' queries I used to answer that the French Army had suffered and fought too long. It was tired to death, but that did not mean that it could not and would not fight well in the coming offensive. I believed the men would be game to the last. They might be too weary to dig, too fed up to care, but when it came to the point they would still fight till they fell. I used to remind those to whom I spoke of how colossal the losses had been. For every hour of the day and night since the war began the French Army had lost a hundred men. A proportion of this number had been captured, others gravely wounded, but nearly half were dead, mak-

ing an average of almost one killed a minute. What I did not say was that I often thought of the cruel clock of the war, ticking away lives incessantly, and of how the heart of France must be beating slower now from loss of blood and from the agony of cumulative grief endured by so many parents, so many wives, so many hundreds of thousands of orphans. The question of morale was one which I was acutely aware of and sensitive to, as one is conscious of the mood of people with whom one is in close contact. I had plenty of opportunities of judging, for French officers used to refer jokingly to me as the man who knew their army better and had been in contact with more of its units than any one of them. This may well have been true in a way, for so many divisions had streamed past the point of junction of the French and British Armies where I was always stationed. But it was one thing to have met innumerable Frenchmen, walked down uncounted miles of trenches, watched their silent garrisons, and passed through an endless number of derelict villages packed with aimlessly-wandering, bored and muddy troops; it was quite another to appraise even approximately the psychological condition of the French Army as a whole.

For one thing, units varied now as they had always done. Some were better than others. Regiments with fine traditions nearly always lived up to them in the French Army as in our own. It was therefore not easy to form an opinion concerning the conglomeration of all these units that went to make up the army.

It would have been most unfair to compare the French Army of 1917 with that of 1914, as unfair as it would be to compare our hastily trained levies, jerked by conscription out of our immense urban areas into camps, with the old Expeditionary Force.

The men who had started off down the roads that led to the war were young. They were all boys then, hundreds of thousands of them, with hope bubbling within them from the inexhaustible store of youth, and they held life cheap as is the way of those in whom life surges so strongly that they cannot realize its flow will one day be exhausted.

After nearly three years of war, the French Army had forgotten how to smile. This I had noticed for some time past with a pang such as one suffers when care and sorrow drive joy from the faces of people one is fond of, for I had grown not only to admire but to be greatly attached to the simple, resourceful and brave soldiers of France. They were stoics in an unassuming way, all soldiers were

that, but there was something of the martyrdom of dumb animals in the way they bowed their backs under misfortune and endured it with a patience and a steadfastness we had not been taught to expect of a mercurial, dashing race. They reminded me of a thoroughbred harnessed to a tumbrel driven by a drunken carter who beat it till it bled.

Although the French had the advantage over us in regard to senior officers, they were not nearly as fortunate as we were in the matter of junior commissioned officers. Their young men had not the power of leadership that ours had acquired on the playing fields of their schools and universities. General d'Esperey was, I knew, concerned at the growing lack of authority and grip shown by the subalterns in his Group of Armies. He realized that this was reacting very unfavourably on the army as a whole. The junior Regular officers had long since gone, they were either promoted or dead. The new subalterns, often old for their rank, sprung from amongst the men themselves, had the outlook and standards of the rank and file. The steel-taut wire of leadership, which only breeding or training can produce, was totally absent in very many second lieutenants and lieutenants, yet they habitually commanded companies.

Sternly General d'Esperey called upon the generals under him to infuse a fresh spirit into the cadres by their personal example and direction, but it was not the sort of malady that, even if diagnosed correctly, responds to orders, however emphatically given.

The very high average intelligence of the French made it easy for them to find capable N.C.O.'s from amongst the rank and file, men who could grasp instructions quickly, tumble to an idea, make the best of a situation; but these same individuals, sprung from the people, could seldom either break away from, dominate or command their fellows. They often lacked the capacity to assume that responsibility expected of even the most junior officer.

Did the army still possess the magnificent faith that had once animated it, that 'do or die' spirit that had burnt so fiercely in 1914? I did not know. Maybe it had been gradually transformed into some sort of reflex action, something you went on with because you had seemingly always done it, something that was now inevitable and inescapable.

As was bound to happen, the vision of the cause for whose sake the soldiers endured so much was fading, the light that had guided them

receded as they advanced farther down the long, hopeless, seemingly endless road of the war. To how many fronts had they been transported by bus and by train, knowing nothing of their destination? How often had they been thrown out by the side of some road, marched past shattered villages, to be shelled in trenches that were always the same, to dig in the same mud, to be hauled at the same barbed wire? Verdun, Champagne, Ypres, Artois, the Somme, the Scarpe: they were all just synonyms for suffering and death. The prospect was not unlike that of eternal damnation, eternal in the sense that it comprised the future as far as a man's mind could foresee it: only one release, death, sudden or agonizing; one hope, a wound not too painful, not too disfiguring. And into the bargain they were badly fed, poorly clad, almost always in miserable billets when out of the line, where they were often as badly shelled as in the trenches, with nothing to look forward to but the drudgery of menial tasks to be performed, the exasperating monotony of drill in soul-destroying, depressing surroundings. This was called resting, the only alternative to the fear and body-racking nervous strain of the trenches. Rare periods of leave hardly provided relief.

Yet the army went on and did as it was told. Discipline was maintained because the leadership was trusted. Discipline, faith in the officers, the habit of obedience, had taken the place of higher ideals.

Later, Monsieur Clemenceau told me two stories which illustrate the frame of mind of the French soldier of the period. The fierce old man loved talking to the men whom he really understood; he never made a mistake in appraising the genuineness or otherwise of those to whom he spoke. One day, in a really dangerous sector where he had no business to be, he walked up to a group of old territorials who were sheltering under a tree as if the bombardment were a hail-storm. 'What are you doing here?' demanded Clemenceau of one of them. 'We don't know,' he answered. 'We were told we were resting.' *'On nous a dit que nous étions au repos.'*

It is impossible to describe better the unquestioning, uncomprehending, fatalistic acceptance of an unintelligible fate.

His other story was of a man he had seen one day in Amiens, when it was an empty, shell-swept place. The soldier, a bearded, middle-aged fellow, was looking down from a bridge into the slowly flowing brown waters of the Somme. 'What's the name of this river?' asked Clemenceau, by way of starting a conversation. 'I don't know, at



home we call it the Loire.' '*J'sais pas, chez nous on appelle ça la Loire.*'

He was thinking of his country, where there also flowed a great stream he loved to watch, and besides in the war what did anything matter, were not all places alike for soldiers whatever their name and position?

Clemenceau said no more. He who was in many ways so brutal seemed to be looking at something a long way off when he told this story, and he choked a little.

I had no knowledge at the time of the very serious view taken of the morale of the French Army by the Secret Service section, whose duty it was to study it.

The main source of information of those in charge of this task was the 'Postal Control', the censorship. The tendencies in the letters examined were carefully noted and tabulated by experts. There were 'Observers' as well, secret-service men who moved about amongst the troops. A report drawn up by this office at this time ran: 'The man in the ranks is no longer aware of why he is fighting. He is completely ignorant of anything happening outside his own sector. He has lost both faith and enthusiasm. He compares his life with that of a convict. He carries out his duties mechanically. He may become the victim of the greatest discouragement, display the worst weakness.'

These symptoms were attributed to physical exhaustion due in great part to too long periods in the trenches, and also to the drudgery of military training imposed on men 'at rest' in filthy billets too near the front, villages shattered by shell-fire, soiled by the endless stream of men who had trailed through them, compelled to sleep on straw so filthy it often had to be burnt, without warmth or cleanliness, in buildings with unhinged doors and broken roofs, sprawling round the enormous combined cesspool and dunghill common in French farms. Worst of all perhaps was the sight of the ancillary services, that never went to the trenches, in occupation of the best buildings. These were deemed to be *embusqués* by the men, who freely said that these non-fighters owed their skins to political influence.

Broken promises had caused confidence to degenerate into scepticism. Too often had the men been told they were going to rest and then found themselves in the front line, been promised relief and then been apparently forgotten in bad sectors, till the life was pounded out of each of the little units that make up a regiment.

Each of these had a corporate spirit, a soul of its own evolved out of the collective mind of the men composing it. If too many men were killed together or in rapid succession, if there was not time to absorb newcomers into the section or platoon, then the spirit died, the soul was destroyed and yet another tiny fraction of the army ceased to exist as a living organism.

Too often also, wrote the Observers, had leave been promised and then withheld. The men believed in nothing any longer. And even leave when it did come was not an unmixed blessing; fifteen to eighteen men, piled into a dirty, completely dilapidated carriage with wooden seats and often with broken windows, designed to carry ten tightly packed passengers in peace-time. And the return was worse still: a heavy-hearted man, utterly bewildered, sent from station to station by careless, often rude, hard-working no doubt but obviously well-fed railway transport officers, who never knew and seemed to care less where a man's unit might be, and who always managed to land him with miles to tramp to his destination, past suspicious pouncing gendarmes inclined to treat every lost wanderer as if he were a deserter.

The secret-service men had discovered that the path of the infantryman was not strewn with roses, and were appalled at the cumulative effect of so much misery. Searching for reasons for the state of demoralization they reported, as if what they had found was not enough, they spoke of the evil influence of criminals released from gaol to fight; and also of the worse ravages of drink, the men's only distraction, the only thing on which they could spend their money.

Had I had an idea that specialists thus diagnosed the morale of the army I should have been aghast. What is more, I should not have believed them. The hardships of the troops I knew well enough, but I did not believe the inner flame was extinguished. I always maintained it was not, even in the far more dreadful circumstances that were to come, and I still firmly believe my diagnosis was sounder than that of the experts. I am glad in any case I did not know their opinion at the time, for it might have undermined my own confidence and judgment.

What effect these reports had on the very few highly placed officers at the G.Q.G. who alone knew of them, I have no idea. If it caused them to conclude that the army could not stand much more strain and that therefore it must be launched on one last desperate effort to win the war, that somehow hope and confidence must be

revived just once more, since there was little hope of lasting out, then it was disastrous. That such reports may have had some influence, a considerable one perhaps, on the decisions of the Commander-in-Chief, is probable enough. Read through spectacles coloured by his fixed idea of a smashing attack, they could but strengthen his purpose and become an added reason for staking everything on a desperate throw. Others might have thought of remedying some of the ills alluded to, but General Nivelle's idea was more Napoleonic. Bonaparte promised the Army of Italy boots when they reached the Plain of Lombardy, the Armies of the Third Republic were under their new leader to find a solace for all their woes when they reached the provinces they were to liberate beyond Reims, beyond the Aisne.

Far as I was from suspecting what the experts thought on the subject, I did ponder rather anxiously on what would occur should the French attack fail. What would be the reaction of the French soldier if all the hopes so sedulously fostered were to collapse suddenly?

In my view and according to my observation, the Frenchman had two identities, that of a soldier and that of a civilian. As the former he was trustful and extraordinarily easy to lead. Not only was he brave and very loyal to his comrades, but if given the least encouragement he displayed the greatest affection and personal regard for his officers. Discipline is strict in the French Army, but the old Regular officer knew how to display a friendly interest in his men which established a personal bond without in the least diminishing his authority. Many, especially in the cavalry, always employed the familiar '*tu*' when speaking to the troopers, thus creating a fatherly atmosphere, for in many better-class French homes the father says '*tu*' to his son, who however always says '*vous*' to him.

Every army has the discipline evolved out of the characteristics of the nation it belongs to. The easy, elastic, intimate relation between officers and men, with in the background the power of the former to inflict swift, heavy punishment, would not have suited us. Something more even, more equable, suited our less emotional, less expansive character better.

The fundamental reasons why, so it seemed to me, the soldier Frenchman, so different an individual from the civilian Frenchman, was so amenable to leadership, were twofold. In the first place the years he served as a soldier were a sacrifice made to his country. He well understood that these were a free gift of himself to the land that meant everything to him. Even those who only understood this

dimly, who were not in the habit of reasoning things out, were the better for having made this direct, tangible sacrifice to an ideal. There were of course exceptions, but this was generally true of the army as a whole.

In the second place, the French soldier trusted his officers. He knew them to be completely disinterested, exposed to the same risks as he himself ran. There was no suspicion that the officer took advantage of him or used him in any way for his own purposes, and so he followed him unquestioningly.

The civilian Frenchman was a very different proposition. He was sceptical and distrustful of his leaders, owing to a system which had long since deprived him of faith in either their characters or their motives. As a responsible member of society, as an elector in fact, he was apt to be cantankerous, critical and ready to impute the lowest motives to those above him. Always chafed by the yoke of authority, however democratic that yoke might be, the French citizen resented the rules by which he was governed, suspecting them of being inspired by the very worst traits in his neighbour's character, as he knew them to be by his own. This was inevitable, since as a rule he could not resist making any illegitimate use he could of the administration and government of his country, under the pretext that if he did not the man next door would.

If he could, by pressure or by favour, obtain some advantage over his fellows or evade a part of the common burden, he did so. This is only human, no doubt. The system was to blame, but the system was made by the men who suffered from it. This is the inherent weakness of a republican form of government, which has not as its solid immutable axis the Crown, completely impartial, high above all ambition, incorruptible and beyond all influence. To the Crown we owe not only a stability but an example we cannot be too grateful for. We have only to observe the French nation, or for that matter the United States, to reach complete conviction on this head.

France has not been governed by men its people trusted, because the mass of electors hope to have a hold upon or to derive some personal advantage from the men they vote for. Every Minister is at the beck and call of every Deputy, whose one care is to get as many posts or favours as he can for his electors, his own job depending upon his success in this direction.

It is curious that a method so obviously leading to injustice should exist in France; for, although the fact is seldom appreciated abroad,

there is no people more attached to the idea of abstract justice than the French. The reason is that, perhaps owing to their failure as a nation to comprehend team-work and team-play, they have never been able to make the necessary self-sacrifice, to refrain from endeavouring to obtain personal advantages at the expense of the community as a whole. It took me many years to grasp the meaning of General de Maud'huy's saying 'When the French can beat the English at football they will be the first nation in the world', but he meant just that. This extraordinary little man whose whole life, minute by minute, was dedicated to the service of his country, had grasped a fundamental fault in the national character, a lack of vision which prevented his compatriots from understanding that none can thrive if all consider themselves free to plunder, pilfer and take advantage of the commonwealth by not contributing their share of what is due to it.

The General who, puffing his immense pipe, used to bang the table with his fist after dinner, saying '*Il faut que nous battions les Anglais au football*,' is gone, the French play better football than they did, but team-work is not yet a national characteristic.

This dissertation may seem to have taken us a long way from the question of the morale of the French Army, but it was necessary to explain the enormous gap that existed between the mental outlook of the Frenchman in his dual capacity as soldier and as civilian.

What I wondered, was whether the civilian would awaken in the soldier if the attacks failed, and what would happen if the army were to become civilian-minded, distrustful of its leaders.

The last days of January were particularly unpleasant. I remember them as a period of muddle, anxiety and grinding work.

On the French side I was dealing with new personalities, a serious handicap with a nation slow to show confidence. On the British, the growing resentment and suspicion of G.H.Q. towards General Nivelle and his Staff led to unconscious asperity displayed at times towards one whose job it was to present and defend the French point of view.

When I think of this time my heart goes out in gratitude to several officers of the Operations section at G.H.Q. whose kindness never wearied, whose support never failed. Out of touch as I was apt to be with the feelings of our own people, apt to tread unconsciously on countless corns by the very nature of my work, which

often by the mere report of an action or a fact might be taken to imply criticism of something whose very existence was unknown to me, they never ceased to protect me, to 'put me wise'. They were very indulgent. I am even more grateful to them to-day than I was then, for, seeing myself more clearly, I can appreciate their attitude the more. As I write I evoke in particular the wise, young, cheerful face of Colonel C. C. Armitage. 'You're a bit of a tiger' he used to say. 'Go slow.' Although I felt anything but a tiger I used to try to follow his advice and also that of Colonel Napper Tandy, always even-tempered, gold spectacles on his long nose, his bald head for ever bent over even balder artillery ammunition states—but when he looked up his smile was always pleasant and welcoming.

A lowered vitality caused by a chill caught in a wet trench one night, and accentuated by the strain of constant exposure to the bitter cold in open cars over great distances generally late at night, imposed a physical drag which was soon to cause a breakdown. Meanwhile I felt like an engine being driven forward with the brakes on. Nevertheless the work had to be done, in spite of the terrible weather conditions.

The first part of the month had been heralded by icy, piercing winds, snow, sleet and rain. Everybody and everything was sodden and damp. Then suddenly really arctic conditions set in, seven weeks of the coldest weather within living memory. The thermometer touched zero once or twice. It was better so for the men in the trenches. For them anything was preferable to the icy dampness; but this was not the case of the solitary traveller by night on frozen skiddy roads. The sponge in my handbag was always a block of ice when I unpacked it, and the cold caused frequent accidents, not only on account of skids but because it affected the metals and frequently led to springs breaking on the bad roads which were a characteristic of the war.

But the cold had more serious results than merely inflicting discomfort on individuals; the water on the Belgian front froze into a solid sheet of ice over which troops could move easily. Our allies had been protected since as far back as 1914 by the inundations with which they had flooded their front. The present situation was too reminiscent of those early days, when we had to call upon the elements to complete the defence of the coast, to be pleasant; none who had participated in the agonizing watch that had then taken place over the rising water, or had prayed as we had all prayed that wind

and tide would be favourable to us and cause the flood to extend rapidly, wished to go through a similar experience. Hard ice was the equivalent of hard ground, for troops could move over it. If the enemy did attack now, troops could be found to meet him, which was not the case in 1914, but a dangerous situation might easily develop before they arrived, and in any case our plans would be upset. What made matters worse was that at the moment a Belgian division was undergoing a period of training a long way off, at a French camp, and would therefore not be available if the enemy took advantage of the weather to attack.

Our Intelligence added to the general alarm by choosing this moment to report that they believed the Germans intended attacking at Ypres. They always and very naturally kept an anxious eye on this sector which had cost us so much to hold, where even a limited reverse would have serious results for us, and a successful advance would yield the enemy greater advantages than anything else.

A point our Command quite rightly never lost sight of, when considering the position at Ypres, was that the enemy could bring up troops there more rapidly than we could reinforce our line. Nevertheless, as the enemy at the moment appeared to have only two divisions available for an offensive in this area, the fears of our Intelligence were pooh-poohed by the French, who drew my attention sardonically to the curious coincidence that now as always rumours of such an attack coincided with some difference of opinion between the two General Headquarters or with a revival of the wrangle concerning an extension of our line.

One ear open to the rumours from the home front which had grown in volume and number in the higher spheres in which I now moved, the other always aware of the continuous dull rumble of the guns, instinctively listening for any increase in the bombardment (the possible herald of an enemy attack which might disturb the intricate operations we were engaged upon), sick at heart and in body, I, like a few hundred thousand more, carried on.

## CHAPTER VII

### CLERMONT AND PARIS

TOWARDS the end of January I fell seriously ill and was out of the hunt for a while. It was singularly unpleasant. The Tenth Army Staff evacuated Moreuil, and in anticipation of the move my little staff had gone on to Clermont, the H.Q. of the Northern Group of Armies. On the day I should have left I could not get up, and found myself stranded in an empty house on the outskirts of the town, which was only visited occasionally by its owner or a caretaker. This person must have reported my presence, for I remember a French soldier coming in once a day; then he ceased to appear, probably called away by some authority ignorant of my existence.

Some kindly woman used to come and give me broth. I imagine she did this purely out of Christian charity, but it is all a jumble in my mind. My only clear impression is one of cold and darkness in the fireless, unlighted, empty house. I never knew how long I was there, but one day my chauffeur, who had been away having a big repair done to the car and had not been informed that Army H.Q. had moved, appeared. He did the only sensible thing, carried me into the car and drove to Clermont where I was well looked after. We left Moreuil just in time. I learnt afterwards that the night I went away the beastly little house I had been in was flattened by a bomb.

My chiefs, who had come to give me a very long rein and were used to my disappearing on a special job for days at a time, had not even missed me, nor had the French, who thought I was with my own army. In fact everyone thought I was somewhere else, doing a job for some other authority, and for once unfortunately no one had really needed me at short notice, otherwise I should have been traced.

Presently I began to get better, though for a long time I felt more wretched than I have ever done before or since. Strength came back slowly. I find I noted bitterly as I got stronger that the military doctor, after the manner of his kind, ordered me chicken, well knowing such a thing was unprocurable.



On February 16th it thawed, and I thought as I peered out of the window that shells would now throw up geysers of mud in the old familiar way and not explode on the surface of the iron-hard ground.

As I became convalescent, visitors began to come; the step up from an Army to a Group of Armies had made a great difference.

I began to hear gossip from Paris, and the conception of a world in which politicians with multitudinous interests played an all-powerful part began to take shape in my mind.

It was disturbing. Hitherto there had been the army, easy to understand, with its own intrigues to be sure, but all on a simple scale. Above and away there had been Ministers, but they in some vague way had seemed to be 'whippers-in' of the nation on behalf of the huntsman Commander-in-Chief.

Now the picture was changing. Politicians were taking precise shape, their activities if not their difficulties and responsibilities were assuming large and bewildering proportions. It seemed a dangerous world full of large and flickering shadows projected over the country in the red glow of the war.

Officers from the capital, only forty miles away, or from the G.Q.G., had curious and interesting tales to tell. Mr. Lloyd George was said to be exercising a growing fascination over French statesmen and to have a marked influence in Paris. He was rumoured to be in correspondence with Painlevé, and to have withdrawn his support from Briand whose fall was anticipated. It was thought Briand might be succeeded by Ribot.

The political side of all this did not convey much to me, but I repeated it to an officer from G.H.Q. who came to see me one day, and it started, so I heard later, a fine buzz in that beehive of military activity.

As I began to sort out these new impressions, I found that one name in particular was attracting increasing attention in the better informed circles in the army—that of Monsieur Painlevé. His power was said to be increasing, and some thought that he might well be a future Minister for War. It seemed that he was not getting on well with Monsieur Briand and was frankly doubtful concerning the appointment of General Nivelle. His men were Pétain and Foch, but he was supposed to favour the former.

I gathered that he was a man of the Left and was trusted for his uprightness. He was, they said, a great mathematician, and had the glamour always attaching to the label of *savant* in France. It

seemed that he was inclined to listen to the growing group of influential persons who, believing it was time the French Army was spared and the man-power of the nation built up again, were gravely concerned because Nivelle's plan meant that once again the French armies were to occupy the very front rank in the deadly limelight of the forthcoming offensive. These people remembered that Joffre had meant to surrender the principal rôle in 1917 to the British. And about time too, French civilians were apt to say, sublimely ignorant of the fact that we had borne the main burden and suffered the greater losses on the Somme. Others, unwittingly strengthening the hands of the minority that was showing some signs of defeatism, repeated the bitter saying coined at the time — 'Germany will fight to the last German and England to the last Frenchman.'

One suggestion, put forward with the idea of husbanding the dwindling French man-power, amazed me. In influential French circles, both military and political, there was a plan on foot whose object was to create mixed corps, one British and two French divisions, under a French general. This was called the *amalgame*.<sup>1</sup> There had been newspaper articles on the subject in the autumn of 1916, but no soldier had taken them seriously. The idea, to anyone who had ever had the task of supplying a mixed Anglo-French force, as had to be done at times during big reliefs, was preposterous. The material difficulties were insuperable, not to mention the far greater ones of attempting to fuse the unmixable British with the insoluble French. Both French and British would very probably have starved, the guns would never have received their shells, and the picture of a dapper French general giving orders which would be accepted literally (if understood) by the British and 'interpreted' anything but literally by his own people, was so ludicrous that one almost forgot to be angry at a suggestion which if carried out would have disrupted our army, by now at least the equal of the French.

But there was such a plan, and I gathered quite definitely that a scheme was on foot in Paris to get rid of General Robertson because he would not hear of it. I was told that General Henry Wilson was receiving an even larger measure of French support than usual because he was not opposed to the *amalgame*.

The Grand Quartier Général was known to be critical of the British plan of operations. Nothing could eradicate from the French military mind the conviction that our Staff was rather

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix VI (page 540).

amateurish and British mental processes exasperatingly slow: otherwise would we not have understood that the new French system of attack was a certain recipe for victory?

All this did not augur well for smooth running in the forthcoming operations, and when I thought over these things I metaphorically bent my back as one does to a coming storm. But such feelings had to be concealed. I lived surrounded by optimists. Even the members of the French Parliamentary Commissions who had visited the front were, I was informed, optimistic. They had seen the Army Commanders, who had one and all affirmed their faith in the success of the forthcoming operations. The Parliamentarians returned to Paris reporting that they had been told 'no front is inviolable. To break through is purely a question of the price you are prepared to pay'. On the other hand, I was told by an officer whose duties took him to the French War Office, that General Lyautey, the Minister for War, seemed to be less confident in General Nivelle's plan than he had been.

Meanwhile the Greeks had made public amends to the Allies by marching their troops to salute the Allied flags in Athens at the end of January. Far more important, the United States had, at the beginning of February, broken off diplomatic relations with Germany and Austria because of the former's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare against enemy and neutral shipping alike. Were the Germans playing their last card? Was it bluff? Only one thing was certain. The other neutral states were not inclined to follow President Wilson's example.

Opinion was divided on the question of Roumania. There was a school, preoccupied by the attitude of Russia and influenced by the French Mission there, which was in favour of abandoning the Roumanians to the mercies of their big, bullying neighbour, while others, disregarding any flaws and faults there might be in Roumania's attitude since she first began to negotiate with the Allies, stoutly declared honour demanded that we should do all that was humanly possible to mitigate her crushing defeat, and that Russia should be compelled to be loyal and succour her without trying surreptitiously to dominate what was left of her miserable country. But Russia was beyond our control, and General de Castelnau, now in Petrograd, telegraphed that she could not possibly assume the offensive before May 1st.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Castelnau thought the Russians would be unable to do more during 1917 than immobilise the forces then opposed to them

To those who maintained that the Germans were on their last legs, and by implication made it clear that anyone who thought otherwise lacked stamina, the Boche replied by attacking in Champagne and taking eight hundred prisoners in the middle of February.

As soon as I began to walk abroad again I saw frowning down on Clermont a large medieval fortress. Always interested in military architecture, I determined to visit it, undaunted by the information that it was used as a girls' reformatory. One day I did so, yet it is not the architecture I recall, but the terrible tragedy of the youthful prisoners.

The Lady Principal conducted a French officer and myself round the place and gave us lucid explanations. In gloomy, locked rooms, the girls, many of them not more than fourteen, in overalls and prison caps, worked in complete silence under the stern gaze of a supervisor. Only for an hour or so in the day (I am not sure about the time, but it was not long) could they run and play in a bleak and completely bare yard. Not a blade of grass, not a flower, not a holiday from year's end to year's end, always silent and at work except for the daily break.

Why were all these young things, so full of life, shut up there? Theft? In very few cases. Some who had been convicted of more serious crimes, if a child can ever be really guilty and not society or its parents who fail to protect it, were in the dungeon tower, still gloomier than the rest of the fortress.

What was the offence of the others? The Principal told us. Most of these girls had been sentenced for clandestine prostitution. The story was nearly always the same. The mother lived with a man not the girl's father. He, returning home drunk one day, would attempt to seduce the girl. The mother, jealous, would fling her out into the street. Homeless, penniless and hungry, the child, unable to keep herself by begging, would turn to a profession of which her environment had made her fully aware. Falling into the hands of pimps or acting on her own initiative, she would solicit. Being unpractised in the ways of the street and ignorant of the law, these children soon fell into the hands of the police, and were convicted and sent to Clermont, where they would remain till they were twenty-one.

The grey-haired Principal looked at me very hard, 'Most of the very young ones we get come from the British Army zone,' she said; and

the sense of bitter shame I felt at her words has not been eradicated after twenty years.

It seemed to me that the Principal, with two men in her grasp, was determined that they at least should realize the horror that lay behind as well as that which pervaded this hell where innocence paid the penalty for vice. She was helpless, an official administering her duties according to law and regulations. She had no hope and no illusions, but she thought the world should know; so we were told that, their senses awakened, perverts were manufactured in the confined unhealthy atmosphere with such ease and rapidity that the place was a hotbed of lesbianism with which locked cells could hardly cope. She told us also that the prison doctor, walking across the yard alone a few weeks before, had been set upon by the girls in a fit of collective erotic frenzy and badly hurt. We two men, she told us, might easily have shared the doctor's fate but for her presence.

Boys in our reformatories, she went on, have a small chance of making good. Rowing the fishing boats in Brittany they become strong and healthy. Some have done well in the war which gave them their chance. My girls have none. The statistics prove that not three in a thousand can hope to lead a normal life. When they leave here at twenty-one they are helpless and friendless. Where are they to go? What family, even if they have one, will welcome back a girl with such a record, with a police dossier fastened to her as if it were branded on her skin? They know by experience, for some of them are allowed to do occasional domestic work in the little town, what humiliation and drudgery would await them in the kind of homes that would give them employment, with the threat of the *Commis-saire de Police* ever in their ears. So the white slave trafficker who hangs about just out of sight beyond the gates, dodging the police, snaps them up.

She was a remarkable woman, that Principal, very stern but with a heart that, before it had been seared into hardness by disappointment, must have been very kind.

My one idea was to escape from her lest she tell me more, and from a place designed to destroy all that is charming and lovely in girlhood. I walked down the hill beyond the heavy gates hoping to get away from the impression I had received, but I never have.

As soon as I was well enough, I obtained a day's Paris leave. It

was my first visit to the capital since the beginning of the war. I had to go, for I had a most important 'date' with a young lady. It was an appointment long deferred, more than a year in fact, but I am afraid that, as is so often the case, my interest was not fully reciprocated, and I could not flatter myself that I occupied a great place in the young person's heart or mind; she never wrote to me, which is perhaps not surprising for she had never seen me and moreover she was not yet three years old. They called her Vivette, short for Geneviève, and she was the daughter of a French officer I held in high esteem.

Born at the beginning of the war, she was to have had her uncle as godfather, but he was killed before he could get leave to attend the ceremony. Another relative was asked to take his place, but he too was killed. I was third choice, and a year previously had accepted, but a few days before the date fixed for the christening I too became a casualty.

Now was an opportunity not to be missed, and I was anxious to get it over before resuming my wanderings in regions where a bullet or a shell might finally settle in the negative the question of whether or not Vivette was to be christened before the war was over.

I arrived in time for a family luncheon. All the women were in deep mourning and heavily veiled, for seven brothers and brothers-in-law had been killed.

The dignity, the calm resignation of those women was deeply moving. The centre of the gathering was a magnificent, serene old lady, the mother of the missing soldiers and of several of the young widows.

Watching these people, I received a lasting impression of the power of what is perhaps the strongest human unit in the modern world, a French family.

As for my god-daughter, she was the prettiest thing I had ever seen, with dark hair and large brown eyes. She came up to my knee and looked, the only white thing in all that heavy black, like a living piece of Dresden china.

This lovely little creature in her poke bonnet, so miraculously different from all the war stood for, the embodiment of life, promise, hope and joy, made death look unreal and foolish, for surely she in her tiny person represented the unconquerable future.

We had luncheon, then went on to the great church of St. François Xavier close by, next door to the Invalides which I was soon to know so well.

Vivette stood on an immense stool during the ceremony, perfectly composed, knowing exactly what to do, helping out the priest who seemed to find it a little confusing to deal with so grown-up a person instead of a baby in arms. Vivette's baby sister was christened at the same time, for fear of accidents I suppose. No chances were being taken about her godfather, a soldier too.

After the christening there was a solemn reception, again every woman in mourning. After it I raced off to buy a doll, and spent as happy a couple of hours as I can remember during the war, my recent purchase on one knee, and my goddaughter, not much larger nor much heavier, on the other. She never ceased to chatter, and even now I seem to remember that charming bird-like little sound.

Presently her father and I took our leave. I felt ill and weak but very happy. As we looked up at the cold, clear sky lit by myriads of stars a great peace came over us. We both felt that we had been near a truth too great and splendid for us to understand, but however far we were from comprehending it we were content, blessed and penetrated in our inmost beings by something impregnated with heavenly beauty. In the light of that afternoon's experience the war seemed utterly despicable and not worthy of a moment's attention.

Sixteen years passed before I saw my god-daughter again, though I watched her from a distance grow from babyhood to girlhood, her laboriously written letters in my desk, her picture in my room. Then she wrote that she was to be married and begged me to attend the ceremony. I promised to do so. On the day of the wedding a lovely creature in white, a cloud of lace and tulle flying behind her, tore across the room and threw her arms round my neck. It was indeed Vivette, lovely still but very different from the little girl I remembered so well.

I saw her married in the great Chapel of the Invalides, in the shadow of the golden dome, under a canopy composed of colours captured by the French armies in bygone wars. Generals were there by the score, and young officers by the dozen, gathered to see this daughter of a great military family united to a young airman. It was magnificent and imposing, but although pleased at what was happening I was also sad and lonely, for I knew that my long one-sided romance with this child I hardly knew must now be over.

By the end of February I was back at my old work. One of my







first impressions was that in the front line there were many echoes of General Rawlinson's view. 'The Boche is up to something.'

There were reports that the Germans were concentrating on building a defensive system between the Oise and the Somme. In some localities factories were being dismantled. The cultivation of the land in the neighbourhood of Chauny had been abandoned, and the agricultural instruments taken away. A number of villages were reported to be evacuated, or partially evacuated, in the neighbourhood of Bapaume and Cambrai. A curious, unreliable yet persistent impression prevailed that the enemy was about to retire. As yet it was but a surmise, impossible to verify and in the main contradicted by facts reason could not impugn; but it did not die down in spite of the pundits in high places who asked for proofs that were not forthcoming and pooh-poohed the idea until the 24th, when the news fell like a minor thunderbolt at Clermont that the enemy had evacuated his positions on the Ancre.<sup>1</sup>

For the last five weeks the British Fifth Army had been carrying out operations which, although not extensive in themselves, were of considerable importance because of the sector chosen.

We had known since the beginning of the year of the great fortified line on which the Germans were working, later known as the Hindenburg Line. The advantages to them of cutting out the immense and dangerous salient from Arras to Soissons<sup>2</sup> were obvious, but it was thought that the line was not yet complete. Further, experience was against the hypothesis that they would withdraw without fighting. The importance of interfering with and if possible preventing the completion of these fortifications was fully realized, and it was calculated that the Fifth Army attacks would force the enemy to retire before the line was ready to receive them.

The operations, which included the capture of the remainder of the Beaumont Hamel spur and the clearing of the Ancre valley, the capture of Grandcourt and an attack on Miraumont, did in fact achieve this end, but we did not realize at the time on what a sensitive spot we were pressing the enemy, nor how serious the situation was for them.

They reckoned that in France they could only oppose 154 divisions to the Allied 190 and that many of their divisions were weaker than ours. They must shorten their front so as to accumulate reserves and enable weary divisions to recover, and the line had to be strong so

<sup>1</sup> See Map opposite.

<sup>2</sup> See Map facing p. 23.

that much-shaken troops could hold it. It was essential that they should not be driven back to the Hindenburg Line until it was ready and they had had time to withdraw their material behind it. Gough's attacks were tending to force them to go before their preparations were complete.

The Germans, we now know, had one preoccupation—to delay the attack they knew must inevitably come from somewhere. They did not expect an offensive on the Russian front before April, but what of the Western Front? An Allied offensive, especially on the Somme, was to be feared.

Time was therefore the essential factor, time which Joffre had realized must be denied them and which Nivelle was now so generously granting. The British Fifth Army attacks on the Ancre advanced the hands of the clock the Germans were striving so hard to retard.

There was another reason why the enemy were anxious to gain time: their unrestricted submarine campaign had started on February 1st and they were most anxious to give it a chance to make its effect felt.

For all these reasons they bent their energies on preparing the Hindenburg Line, withdrawing their stores and material behind it, and carrying out a programme of complete destruction in the country they were about to abandon.

The whole operation, to which they gave the name of *Alberich*,<sup>1</sup> was to be carried out in thirty-nine days. Orders were issued on February 4th that the operation was to begin on the 9th (first Alberich day). The last Alberich day was March 15th. The retreat itself was to begin on March 16th (first marching day).<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile the German Intelligence set about bluffing the Allies as to their real intentions through the neutral press, with considerable success.

But these events were still hidden from us. All that we knew at the time was that by February 24th the enemy positions on the Ancre had been evacuated and that our Fifth Army was everywhere advancing.

The whole of the next day the most sensational news kept pouring into Clermont. Prisoners stated that the Germans were blocking up the roads and blowing up the cellars and wells in Bapaume. The British Fourth Army telephoned that it had also learned from

<sup>1</sup> Alberich, the malicious dwarf of the *Nibelung Saga*; a good name.

<sup>2</sup> The last marching day was the 19th—only in the centre between St. Quentin and La Fère was a fourth day required.

prisoners that the greater portion of the German guns had been withdrawn six days previously, and that only a few were left behind Bapaume. They declared that the subterranean passages under the town had been mined. A captured German Guardsman stated that he and twenty others had held 1500 yards of front with orders to display the maximum activity, send up flares and in fact do everything to make us believe things were much as usual.

It was also gathered from prisoners that the Germans were falling back to the powerful line which we called the Le Transloy-Loupart Line, but that although the wire defences were finished the defensive system was in other respects not complete. Others declared that their officers had told them they were to fall back gradually to a position a few kilometres in front of Cambrai and that this movement was to be completed by March 25th.

The Fourth Army Intelligence told us that the general impression of the German troops was that the retreat was being carried out to paralyse our offensive and that they would attack while we were organizing our new positions. It did not seem that the German morale had suffered in the least from the retreat.

The question at once arose — was this withdrawal on the front of the Fifth Army the preliminary movement in a vast retreat extending from the Aisne and including Péronne, Noyon and Chauny? Did it mean the enemy was aware of our plans? We had intended tearing through the great protruding pouch by bursting open its flanks. If the Germans withdrew we should clutch at nothing but air and our plans would miscarry.

Every imaginable theory was advanced: 'The withdrawal if and when it did come would synchronize with a blow elsewhere. It was a gigantic ruse to draw away our reserves from the point the enemy meant to attack.' 'The Hindenburg Line was only a precaution. Had we not ourselves worked on defensive systems in rear? This was a particularly well-chosen one, that was all.' 'The withdrawal on the British front was a small matter due to local conditions. Would the Germans, who had hitherto clung to every inch of ground, contemplate the blow to their morale which must follow so considerable a withdrawal as a retreat to the Hindenburg Line? Nothing was less likely.' This was the opinion the G.Q.G. officers expressed on the telephone; very few guessed what the real intention and motives of the Germans were, or that they were withdrawing in haste under the compulsion of Gough's attack.

General d'Esperey of course at once took steps to find out whether the withdrawal was likely to be extended to his front. The Armies were ordered to carry out raids and capture prisoners, and the artillery to shell the German battery positions to ascertain whether the guns had been withdrawn. Units were instructed to speed up their preparations for the general attack and to state the minimum warning they would require to carry it out, and the air force was ordered to watch carefully to find out whether the Germans were destroying bridges, etc., in their area.

Unfortunately, although it was d'Esperey who ordered the raids, it was the Germans who carried them out. On the night of February 28th and the morning of March 1st they invaded the French trenches at various points and carried off nine prisoners. I noted in my diary that the enemy was either trying to fool us or wanted to see whether the British were extending their reliefs still farther south.

The necessity to act quickly in view of the new situation presented by the enemy's retreat was obvious and imperative; but the difficulty of doing so was greater than we at the G.A.N. realized.

Early in February Nivelle had told Joffre's liaison officer that Ministers were pressing him not to attack too soon. During the middle of the month he was resolved upon attacking on March 10th or 15th 'without waiting for the British'; but by February 21st he had decided to postpone the attack until April 1st, for the preparations on his own new sector of attack were not progressing nearly as fast as he had anticipated.

Worse still, General Mangin, commanding the Sixth Army, charged with the assault on the new front of attack in the neighbourhood of Soissons, was clamouring for delay. Fine weather was necessary for the satisfactory employment of his black troops. The country over which he was to attack was difficult. He declared that the ground must be dry so that his infantry could get over it, and that the season must be so far advanced that he could rely on good air observation, for he had few ground observation posts.

But if the new sector of attack imposed the necessity of waiting for better weather conditions, this was not so in the case of the old front in the neighbourhood of Reims, which had been selected by Joffre for the very reason that it could be attacked early in the year. Here the ground was open, there were good ground observation posts, and there was every advantage in attacking before the enemy had time to dig himself in farther. It was obvious he was not wasting his time.

On this front air observers watched the two German defensive positions growing into four. Commanders on the spot became increasingly anxious as information accumulated concerning these German preparations. As early as February 4th a civilian repatriated from the occupied area was reported to have said that the enemy was making great preparations in the region Laon-Reims.

The conflicting claims of the two sectors, the result of an initial mistake, could but grow.

What mattered it to General Mangin that the Germans, with time in hand, were strengthening their positions and building new lines on the old sectors of attack, if, should he be ordered forward prematurely, he could not even capture the first positions in the new sector facing him?

General Micheler, in command of both sectors, ambitious and enterprising, enthusiastic at first in his belief in the Commander-in-Chief's dashing plan, now began to be assailed by doubts. He could not bridge the difference between the requirements of the two fronts; the gap between them was one of seasons, of weather.

Pinned down by the Commander-in-Chief to his original declarations in favour of the attack, a prisoner of the high command he had accepted, he found it impossible to get General Nivelle to share his growing misgivings and was snubbed when he hinted at his difficulties. A man of greater moral courage, a Pétain or a d'Esperey, would have had it out with his chief, and had he failed to convince him, would have made it clear he was merely carrying out orders imposed upon him. This would probably have led to his being relieved of his command. He chose the less courageous course, was critical of the operation to his Staff, but only hinted at his doubts to the Grand Quartier Général. Trying to reconcile the irreconcilable, he was to acquire a reputation for duplicity whereas he was only weak.

The difficulties between him and Mangin have already been alluded to. They were soon in violent conflict. Mangin, a disciple and ex-subordinate of General Nivelle at Verdun, reasserted that he could only obtain good results under favourable weather conditions, but he was confident that given these he could fulfil all the Commander-in-Chief's hopes and more.

The controversy raged over the rate of advance and the distance of the objectives to be attained on the first day by the Sixth Army.

Its Commander rejected with acrimonious volubility Micheler's very mild counsels of prudence. He appealed both directly and indirectly to General Nivelle on the ground that his superior was curbing and therefore ruining the *élan* of his attack.

The relationship between the two generals had been impaired at the outset by the unusual form adopted by General Nivelle in appointing Micheler who, when put in charge of the Group of Reserve Armies, was described in orders, contrary to the normal practice of the French Army, as the Commander-in-Chief's delegate. Micheler did not derive his powers, as was usual in such a case, from a Decree signed by the President of the Republic and the Minister for War. He appears to have considered that he was thus placed in the position of a Chief of Staff rather than in that of a Commander within his own sphere. This seems to have been, in his view at least, a real restriction of his authority over Mangin.

When he realized that Mangin was planning to reach the gates of Laon on the evening of the first day's attack, he objected with great moderation, emphasizing the importance he attached to the thorough preparation of the artillery forward bounds and to all questions of detail.<sup>1</sup> He was, however, careful to add that should the enemy's resistance break down for any reason, nothing should prevent immediate advantage being taken of such a situation. General Mangin was exasperated by what he described as this old-fashioned pettifogging attitude.

General Nivelle, who at first had supported Micheler, had towards the end of January, perhaps influenced by Mangin, prescribed an advance of from eight to ten kilometres on the first day, over very difficult country. Mangin was naturally delighted; he felt he was being encouraged by the Commander-in-Chief; the new objectives might have been of his own choosing. His pretensions increased to such an extent that he actually claimed to impose his views concerning the employment of the Tenth Army. Micheler protested, and the Commander-in-Chief called a conference at Mangin's Headquarters, where, it seems, in Nivelle's presence, Mangin complained bitterly to his face of Micheler, his direct chief.

He demanded that the leading divisions of the Tenth Army, which was to be in reserve, should be placed under his orders, so that he could throw them into the battle at the moment he considered opportune, that is when in his opinion the German front was broken.

<sup>1</sup> See Map facing page 514.

Micheler objected, saying he alone could judge where, on the whole front of battle, these divisions should be engaged.

Mangin also declared that the Army Group Commanders' orders went into far too much detail, and were often contradictory. They paralysed initiative, induced hesitation and confused the minds of those who were to carry them out, with the result that no one understood what form was to be given to the attack.

General Micheler, according to his own account, stood this onslaught for some time, then finally turned on the Commander-in-Chief, saying that as he allowed General Mangin to rail against orders which he (Nivelle) had seen and approved, he disclaimed all responsibility for the Sixth Army, and walked out.

On February 13th Nivelle wrote to Micheler telling him he had taken Mangin seriously to task for the way he had spoken and behaved on the 11th.<sup>1</sup> If there were divergences of view between the two generals, he said, they were to be submitted to him. This decision tends to prove that the relationship between Micheler and Mangin as laid down by the Commander-in-Chief was anything but that prescribed by army custom. Arbitration between a chief and his subordinate is not generally countenanced.

A compromise between Micheler and Mangin was finally reached. The second positions were to be attacked at 0 plus 3 hours instead of 0 plus 2, and the third positions at 0 plus 6 instead of 0 plus 5; thus far had Micheler prevailed.

What gives the whole incident an unpleasant savour of duplicity is that General Nivelle, who had written in such a friendly confident tone to Micheler on the 13th, later sent a letter to General Mangin in which, referring to the dispute, he wrote:

On leaving your Headquarters and returning to Compiègne I already felt intuitively that the confidence of some of my lieutenants had been shaken, that it was impossible to go on like this, and the conclusion was strengthened in my mind that the remedy for this state of affairs was to remove the gangrened elements and to entrust you, Mangin, whose confidence and resolution had remained intact, with the command of the whole attack. But the gangrene was deep, politicians in the highest posts upheld General Micheler, and I concluded that this was not possible.

From now on Micheler and his other Army Commanders began to

<sup>1</sup> Appendix VII (page 541).



build hopes upon and assign tasks to the untried French tanks, which probably required at that stage of their development better weather conditions than were needed even for the artillery preparation. They found it impossible to solve otherwise the problem of an operation aimed at a break-through of the farthest German line at the first assault.

Meanwhile the enemy had become aware that the French intended to attack on the Aisne. The forthcoming offensive was the subject of conversation in every dug-out and in the cafés of the remotest villages. Even the Press in neutral countries spoke of it. So open was the talk that the German Intelligence might well have thought that these were rumours spread about to mislead them. But the Germans were not misled, for they knew exactly what was afoot. About February 15th they captured on the body of a French officer an order of the 2nd French Infantry Division which clearly pointed to a great French offensive on the Aisne in April. With incredible imprudence, orders affecting not only the unit but the corps and neighbouring corps were circulated right down to the battalions. It was a copy of one of these that fell into the enemy's hands.

From that moment on, so Ludendorff tells us, the Germans were in a position to discount rumours of attacks in Lorraine and in the Sundgau (the district west of Mulhausen). All they had to do was to strengthen at their leisure an already very strong position, and build concrete machine-gun shelters placed so as to support each other — in fact take every measure dictated by experience to repel an attack of which, thanks to our imprudence, they were well aware. But the French never suspected that the enemy were so accurately informed of their plans.

Towards the end of February I paid my first visit to the front line since my illness. Captain Gillot, my frequent companion when it was a question of 'trench-hopping,' accompanied me. Himself a liaison officer of the Operations section, he often managed to get sent to the same sector as myself, for we had become friends. If there was anything to be laughed at we laughed at it together, and to be amused at the same things is a great bond.

I wish those Englishmen who believe that Frenchmen really do embody the faults that legend and prejudice ascribe to them could have known Gillot. He was an engineer and a staff officer, very

able and intelligent, but so modest and quiet that his great worth and qualities were not at once apparent. Qualities of the head are common enough in the French Army, but he had as well qualities of the heart that are rare in any country. His square, dark soldier's face surmounted by the round French steel helmet, and his long, straggling moustache, gave him an appearance typical of his calling, but the kindly, frank, confiding gaze that revealed itself through the reflections of his pince-nez was purely his own.

I had been ordered to report on how the liaison was working at the junction of the two front lines. There were also a number of points to be dealt with at the headquarters of the XIV Corps on the extreme left of the French.

Having dealt with the Corps we went to the village of Erches, where we met a French colonel, a cheerful soul. Seeing my uniform he dashed into the derelict house he inhabited and came back triumphantly holding up a bottle of port, saying in excellent English that he had saved this bottle for just such an occasion.

We were enjoying this, sitting on packing cases, when a worried-looking telephone operator popped his head inside the door and said — 'They have just intercepted a German message saying they are going to shell the village.'

Immediately afterwards a clerk appeared and with frenzied haste collected the few papers that were lying about. Through the frameless window I saw him disappear down the steps of a dug-out. This reminded me that we ought to be pushing on.

We were given as guide a sergeant who had the very unusual distinction for a non-commissioned officer of being decorated with the Legion of Honour as well as the Médaille Militaire and the Croix de Guerre. But if our guide was a renowned warrior he had no sense of direction and lost his way. I was wearing some new-fangled waterproof equipment which was exceedingly heavy. Presently we found ourselves in shallow trenches without parapets, and were badly sniped. We had to run in short spurts, and I was still so weak that in a short time I became exhausted. Gillot's strong, square shoulders kept disappearing for longer and longer intervals ahead. I could not keep up. He came back and relieved me of my field-glasses, revolver and gas-mask. But the mud was very bad, and soon I got stuck again and sank in deep. Gillot and the sergeant worked at pulling me out at considerable danger to themselves, but could not manage it. One of them

went for help and crawled back with two men; between them they extricated me. Happily we were close to the front line by now, and presently we got there. A strong tot of cognac pulled me together and I was able to achieve the object of my visit. The liaison was anything but good. There was not even an interpreter to enable the two flank companies to arrange for a reliable and well-understood plan of mutual support.

Before I had concluded my investigations, which included interviewing the French and British company commanders, a man put his head round the gas-screen of the dug-out we were in and shouted that the Germans were attacking the British company next but one on the left. Germans were getting out of the trenches facing us. The French company we were with was on the fire-step in a moment, and a very good performance it was; but as we were in a salient it was very uncomfortable, for it looked as if we might be cut off. Flares went up like mad and the machine-gun barrages hissed and whined as the thick sprays of bullets passed overhead. There was also a fairly heavy bombardment of 4.5's, but the raiding German infantry was luckily held up and heavily punished by the 75's. The liaison, though theoretically poor, was after all not so bad in practice.

After dark we finally reached the village of Bouchoir. I was completely worn out, and I don't think I could have managed the return journey without the support of Gillot's strong arm.

On the last day of February I dined with General Fayolle, one of the very sweetest and wisest old men I have ever met, and his Chief of Staff, Colonel Duval. The General had commanded the French Sixth Army until it was relieved by us. He and his Staff were now in reserve. I remember that evening particularly clearly, perhaps because I was so glad to see them both again.

They also were, I think, pleased at this opportunity of recalling Méricourt, mutual friends, the Battle of the Somme.

The first thing they asked for was news of General Rawlinson and General Montgomery, their neighbours during that long-drawn-out struggle. It had been most fortunate that these two couples had found themselves neighbours at that critical and trying time. They had shown themselves to be good comrades, the Chiefs of Staff as remarkable as their leaders, for they were both very fine men and endowed with the gift of tact and the charm of exquisite manners,

Fayolle, who was later to become a Marshal of France, was one of the kindest old gentlemen imaginable. He had retired before the war, what hair he had was white, and his high bald head was that of a savant. His mind did not belie his appearance, for he had a scholarly, gentle mentality and needed a stronger and younger man at his side. He provided wisdom, his Chief of Staff the drive. He always made me think of a kind of bird I have never seen or heard of but which I feel must exist somewhere, a kindly, friendly old bird with a short hooked beak and prominent round eyes, whose voice is in keeping with its appearance.

This impeccable technician had one fault, he lacked authority when dealing with obstreperous corps commanders. Upon several occasions I had seen General Joffre step in with the weight and force of an 8-inch shell and re-establish instantaneous order amongst General Fayolle's argumentative but now dismayed subordinates.

He had his little idiosyncrasies which were noted with affectionate amusement by his Staff. '*Enfin, tout de même*' he used to exclaim, which according to the intonation meant surprise, indignation or even pleasure, and the offices and messes used to ring with '*Enfin tout de même's*' in every imaginable tone.

Fayolle loved a garden, and I often saw him wandering alone down a path running at the back of some derelict house, at moments when important decisions had to be taken, poking about with a stick at beds in which flowers still bloomed in spite of the war.

His Chief of Staff, Colonel Duval, was one of the finest soldiers the war produced. He would have made a great executive anywhere, except that he had a soldier's quixotic ideas. He would, for instance, far rather be 'done' than run the risk of 'doing' anyone himself.

I can testify that he was the dynamo that drove the French Army on so successfully during the Battle of the Somme.

One of the things he did was to hold a conference of Corps Chiefs of Staff every night. Whatever happened each corps had to be represented. Here the daily difficulties were ventilated, everyone learnt what his neighbour was doing, common problems were thrashed out, plans were settled, immediate decisions were taken. I had been given the right to be present and often was; and I am certain that these meetings under Colonel Duval provided the most efficient method of command I saw during the war.

The system he employed was unique at the time, and should be studied by all those whose business is the direction of war, but the

man himself would be hard to copy, and very few could emulate him. This very remarkable man had had to leave his post while the fighting was still going on, owing to severe eye trouble, and so great had been his force and drive, which however urgent never lacked urbanity, that when he left, the whole tempo of the French progress was noticeably slowed down.

As was the French way, Fayolle gave me an excellent dinner. The surroundings, however, were more depressing than the trenches. The Sixth Army Staff were living in the Château of Verberie, which bore on every side signs of German vandalism. The billiard table was still upside down, and the horses which had been fastened to its legs had kicked in the beautiful parquet floor. Valuable pictures had been slashed, the eyes of disdainful eighteenth-century ladies shot out, and all sorts of other revolting bestialities committed.

General Fayolle told me that he believed we now had a chance of reaping the harvest sown in so much blood on the Somme. He was inclined to think that the Germans were going to withdraw opposite the G.A.N. The delay in unleashing the French Armies on that front was hard to understand, but no doubt there were excellent reasons; he was far too well-disciplined to criticize his chiefs.

At Clermont we thought it probable that the Germans in front of us would withdraw. The guns of the G.A.N. stood by in readiness to begin the preliminary bombardment. The infantry, in good heart, was ready to move up and attack. The clenched fist was lifted to strike at the enemy as he was in the very act of slinking away. All that was needed was an order. We feared that General Nivelle would not act in time: it occurred to none of us that he would not act at all.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE GALAIS CONFERENCE—I

MANY cross-currents were flowing under the surface in Paris while the preliminary movements necessitated by Nivelle's great offensive were being carried out. The disappearance of Joffre, by removing the great weight of his influence from the political safety valve, had let loose a scalding jet of intrigue in many directions. The politicians had asserted their power by obtaining his dismissal, but already the figure set up in his stead, although rousing great enthusiasm in some quarters, was being regarded in others with doubt not untinged with suspicion.

In France public opinion is extremely sensitive, and the way news and rumour travel is extraordinary. With us such communication is hampered by the non-conductive quality of the Englishman, due to natural reserve and an inhibiting fear of the consequences to which gossip may lead. Not so the Frenchman, who, unhampered by convention or tradition, is a remarkable broadcaster, especially when he is a politician.

The new leader was being carefully watched. He had superseded many well-known generals who had the public confidence. They did not know him, nor he them. They held themselves aloof, not yet critical but prepared to be, and their friends shared their attitude.

In their desire to make their power felt, the politicians had arrogated new powers to the Parliamentary Army Commission, which scattered its members all over the front. They appeared individually or in groups at the different headquarters.

Formerly they had been strictly under control and their powers carefully defined by the G.Q.G. Now they wandered almost at will, becoming the confidants (under promise of secrecy, of course) of many a general whose ideas and critical faculties thrived and blossomed in an atmosphere no longer overshadowed by Joffre, who above all things had been jealous of his authority over his subordinates. He had possessed the right to appoint and dismiss Army and Corps Commanders. This power had been withdrawn from Nivelle and restored to the Minister for War, and thus indirectly to the Chamber. This was no small diminution of the prerogative of the

Commander-in-Chief. It was both a real accession of strength to the Chamber and an important sop to its vanity.

Although, as stated in an earlier chapter, the members of the Army Commission returned from their visits to the front enthusiastic partisans of the offensive, the feeling that he was being closely watched, that no longer as formerly did a powerful military screen shield him from the glare of public criticism and observation, had its effect on General Nivelle. He began to show some slight signs of nervousness. The 'interior' worried him. Even in such small things as *communiqués* he displayed a tendency to withhold bad news. He was growing nervous of what France was thinking of him as a Commander. On the other hand he was as confident as ever in his plan, and as the days passed he became ever more self-assertive. The coolness of some of his subordinates, and the growing difficulties which he endeavoured to brush aside, only tended to make him more dogmatic.

If he had had any tendency to falter, his doubts would have been overridden by the tremendous personality of Colonel d'Alenson, who occupied the ubiquitous position, not foreseen by the French regulations, of *Chef de Cabinet*, a kind of personal assistant to the Commander-in-Chief.

I have had occasion to describe him elsewhere. He was one of the strangest characters thrown up by the war. An acute observer called him a Napoleon without genius, which was cruel certainly but may have been true.

An immensely tall, loose-limbed man who looked untidy not so much because of his clothes as because of the way his ungainly limbs were thrown together; his cavernous face, prominent cheek bones, and receding forehead were covered by a sallow skin, and the top of his head by closely-cut coarse hair the colour of a fallow deer. His supercilious manner had antagonized me when I first met him, but later when with practice I caught the gist of the sardonic and often humorous remarks that he shot out in a low muffled voice, like the discharge of a distant gun far above my head, I came to like him. A strange light burned in his deep-set eyes. We knew he was dying of phthisis, but I for one never guessed the urge in the man, the frantic ambition that possessed him to play a part in winning the war before the death he knew to be so close overtook him.

At this period I saw him occasionally, but I cannot pretend that I noticed a special change in him, although I could see that he had

absolute faith in the forthcoming offensive, and I knew well enough that he had acquired an extraordinary position at the G.Q.G., standing between the most powerful and authorized officers and the Commander-in-Chief.

D'Alenson was far more acute and intelligent than would have been gathered from his appearance, and he was no mean judge of men, but, consumed by an illness that may well have falsified his judgment, and finding General Nivelle receptive, he concentrated all his energy, all his enthusiasm, upon infusing into his chief the blind faith his limited span of life impelled him to have in the great offensive. His energy was contagious, his illness he forgot, and this one dying man, guided by the false light evoked by his fever, fearing above all things the inexorable passage of time, feeling that everything must be compassed within the narrow limits of his own lifetime, urged constantly, such was the frenzy of his haste, that the tempo of the attack and the speed of the preparations should be increased, until the impression one gained ceased to be that of high authority prescribing dispatch, but rather of an uncontrolled force like a swollen torrent rushing madly onward. I do not think d'Alenson cared whether his name lived in history as the animator, the *eminence grise*, of the offensive, but I do believe that for him death would have lost its sting if his life had ended in the glory of a victory for France.

With such a fanatic as the Commander-in-Chief's most influential adviser, it is not surprising that the French Higher Command should have become more and more resentful of the stolid, impenetrable and unenthusiastic attitude of British G.H.Q., which carried on its work with a sceptical eye upon and a non-committal attitude towards General Nivelle's schemes. The Grand Quartier realized the British distrust of anything new, and, too impatient to humour it, laboured under a double feeling of exasperation that these slow Britishers would not realize that time was the enemy, nor appreciate to the full the stupendous possibilities of the new plan.

A further source of annoyance to the French, to which I have already referred, was what I often heard them describe as 'That willing horse, a German attack on Ypres'. According to them the British Intelligence always kept this obliging animal ready bridled to be trotted out in answer to the summons — 'The French want us to do something we don't like.' There was some justification for this point of view after Sir Douglas Haig took over the command, and I



always watched curiously for news of an impending German onslaught whenever, for instance, we were asked to lengthen our line, but the fact remains that the fear of an attack on Ypres was real enough, and never far absent from the minds of the directing Staff at G.H.Q.

The growing difficulties between French and British Headquarters were apparent to anyone concerned with the relations between them. General des Vallières, the Head of the French Mission at G.H.Q., who was an old friend of mine, spoke to me several times on the subject and said that he longed to be relieved of his post and sent to the front. (His wish was eventually granted, and he was killed in action commanding a division.)

A fine soldier and a very upright man, des Vallières turned out not to have the temperament of a liaison officer. He had gone to G.H.Q. as a strong Anglophile but somehow was antagonized. He was unhappy with us and gradually became suspicious of our intentions and motives. His dispatches reflecting this frame of mind rendered more difficult an already difficult situation.

The plan of operations Nivelle had sent to Haig on January 25th had not improved matters.<sup>1</sup> The general principles enunciated were merely an application of the ideas already expressed at the London conference, but the tone was dictatorial, and Nivelle spoke of the British armies as if they were completely subordinated to him. In fact he went so far as to lay down not only the different zones of attack, but the proportion of the British Army that should be engaged in each; and he brushed aside the British attack on the Vimy Ridge, the preparations for which were already well advanced. G.H.Q. deeply resented the tone and the assumptions of this communication, but as is the English way little was said; we went quietly on with our preparations, carrying out our own ideas exactly as if nothing had happened.

Instead of using all their influence to induce a better understanding between the soldiers, the politicians on both sides of the Channel set about solving the problem in their own way, and resorted to intrigue to achieve their ends. They resolved in secret to place Sir Douglas Haig under General Nivelle's orders.

The plan derived its strength from, indeed it owed its existence to, the all-too-obvious dissensions between the British soldiers and their political chiefs, of which the French were well aware. They were

<sup>1</sup> Appendix VIII (page 542)

fully prepared (and in the prevailing atmosphere of ill-will and intrigue who can blame them?) to use the British politicians against their military advisers, but they liked it less when a little later it dawned on them that Mr. Lloyd George had thought farther ahead than they had, and was in reality using them to try indirectly to get rid of Sir Douglas Haig.

The conception of a supreme direction of the military operations was of course an excellent one in itself. A central authority, evolving a plan of campaign to which both British and French conformed, had existed in practice when Joffre led the French armies; but for a scheme, such as the politicians now had in mind, to be workable and not to remain a dangerous fiction, goodwill, a great deal of goodwill, was necessary, and the way they set out to try to obtain what they wanted was calculated to foster the maximum of antagonism and opposition. Moreover the form of unity of command they sought to bring about was a fundamentally unworkable one.

In 1918, a Commander was chosen who stood over and above the national Army Commanders. He had to have a nationality of his own; he happened to be a Frenchman, but he was responsible, or supposed to be, to all the Allied Governments equally. This was a very different conception from that of placing the British Army under the orders of a general in command of a neighbouring army, who happened, further, to be junior in rank to the British Commander-in-Chief.

The negotiations between Paris and London were carried on through the officer representing the G.Q.G. at the War Office. This officer, Commandant Bertier de Sauvigny, was a pleasant good-looking man who was well liked in London. He was placed in a very unfortunate position that laid him open to the accusation of disloyalty, for he was accredited to Sir William Robertson and not to any Minister, and his duties were purely military, or so the British soldiers thought. But he was in touch with Mr. Lloyd George, and on February 15th he had a very important interview with him at No. 10 Downing Street, of which he breathed not a word to General Maurice or Sir William Robertson. As a result of this interview, Bertier de Sauvigny reported to Beauvais and to the Minister of War, that Mr. Lloyd George had told him that General Nivelle should be able to make use of all the troops, both French and British, operating on the Western Front; that the prestige Haig enjoyed with the

British public and with the army would not allow of his being put directly under the French Commander-in-Chief, but that if the War Cabinet thought such a measure indispensable, they would not hesitate to give secret orders to Haig to that effect.<sup>1</sup>

The problem from the French point of view now became simplicity itself; it consisted in so shaping events that it would become evident that it *was* indispensable that Haig should be placed under Nivelle's orders, a task to which some members of the French War Cabinet lent a willing hand.

It was decided on the initiative of the British War Cabinet that an Inter-Allied conference to be held at Calais at the end of February offered the required opportunity to carry out the great *coup*. General Robertson and Sir Douglas Haig were to be taken by surprise. The method employed makes one think of latter-day American gangsters. They were to be 'taken for a ride' to Calais and there 'put on the spot'.

General Robertson did not attend the last meeting of the War Cabinet held before the conference, on Saturday, February 24th.<sup>2</sup> He had been told that he need not come, which was unusual when military matters were to be discussed. Suspecting nothing and having plenty to do, he remained at work in the War Office, little guessing that on Mr. Lloyd George's proposal the decision had been taken in principle to place the British armies under General Nivelle.

The conference was called ostensibly to deal with the quarrel, which had now become a bitter one, between the French and British Headquarters concerning the railways. The system which supplied the British armies had broken down completely, and it was obvious that until it was reorganised the British attack could not take place. Sir Douglas had asked that the two Governments should meet to discuss the matter, but General Robertson urged him to try and compose his differences with General Nivelle by direct negotiation. In deference to this suggestion, Haig had a meeting with Nivelle, as a result of which he decided that the intervention of the politicians was unnecessary, but meanwhile the latter had decided, without informing the soldiers, that apart from the question of the railways it was urgent 'to investigate the chances of success of the forthcoming operations and to establish complete unity of view

<sup>1</sup> Appendix IX (page 546).

<sup>2</sup> The British War Cabinet consisted of Mr. Lloyd George, Lord Curzon, Lord Milner, Mr. Bonar Law, Mr. G. N. Barnes and Sir Edward Carson.

between the Commanders'. They therefore informed the Staffs that a conference was to be held at Calais.

It opened on the afternoon of Monday, February 26th.

Mr. Lloyd George and the contingent from the War Office, headed by General Robertson and General Maurice, travelled over together. On the way to the coast, in the special train that conveyed them, the Prime Minister came in to see the generals in their carriage. He was very friendly, full of chuckles and smiles, so that even Major Lucas, General Robertson's A.D.C., discarded the official expression he had put on when the Prime Minister walked in. Lucas, utterly devoted to his chief, was known as 'The Monument'. He often looked harried, and no wonder, but his frequent preoccupations did not detract from his powers as a keen observer and cryptic recorder of the minor eccentricities of the great.

The only reference the Prime Minister made to the coming conference was when he was about to go back to his own coach. 'The French are playing out all their trumps in the next offensive', he said. 'We must help them all we can.' Not a word was said to give General Robertson the least inkling of the petard with which it was intended so soon to hoist him.

Sir Douglas Haig brought with him to Calais General Davidson, in charge of Operations at G.H.Q., Sir Eric Geddes, the newly-appointed Head of the Transport Service, now a general but soon to be transmuted into an admiral, and his Private Secretary, Major Sir Philip Sassoon. The latter played at times a far more important rôle in the inner councils of the Commander-in-Chief, whenever politics or politicians were under review, than would appear from his rank. To the casual observer he did little more than deal with the Commander-in-Chief's correspondence, but he had been with Sir Douglas for a long time, was a Member of Parliament, and was in fact an unofficial intermediary between G.H.Q. and London.

The Hotel of the Gare Maritime at Calais is well known to British travellers. Through its dismal portals generations of sea-sick passengers have streamed. It has harboured many strange guests and witnessed many curious scenes. Many a man with a false passport has heaved a sigh of relief as he crossed its doors; many a love-sick couple have gilded its dingy frescoes with their dreams.

It was singularly uninviting; flanked by shunting trains, overlooking

the dismal harbour, it is in peace-time connected with all manner of unpleasant things—customs, passports and *chefs de gare*, all housed on the platform level, that is the ground floor of the hotel. In most people's minds it evokes a scene of distracted activity, porters rushing about, passengers having lost their luggage and their heads, a bleak wind.

To-day the wind was the only familiar thing. No trains save the French Prime Minister's special, no passengers. For a long time now the hotel had been deadly quiet; few soldiers came that way; and not many civilians had gazed from its windows and shuddered at the great guns pointing towards the cold sea where lurked the submarine.

It was in this unattractive setting that the conference, so soon to become famous, opened at 3.30 p.m.<sup>1</sup>

The French War Cabinet was represented by the Prime Minister, Monsieur Briand, and by the Minister for War, General Lyautey.

Monsieur Briand, as always, appeared bored, but his grey eyes were extraordinarily intelligent and arresting, and his voice when he spoke was as enchanting as the sound of a 'cello played by a master. He offered the strongest contrast to his Minister for War. It was as if nonchalance and action were sitting side by side.

Lyautey looked the embodiment of energy. His hair *en brosse* over a high forehead, and his big moustache, gave him a certain air of fierceness; his eyes were very alert, but his irregular features and wide, rather crooked nose made a very sympathetic ensemble. His voice boomed as only that of a deaf man used to asserting his authority can do.

Mr. Lloyd George was the only representative of the British Government. He was flanked as usual by Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Maurice Hankey, the Secretary of the War Cabinet.

That extraordinary man, who played so important a part behind the scenes of British politics for two decades, looked then as he looks now, as he will probably always look, a small, a cherubic d'Artagnan. A high forehead, hair brushed round to conceal a seemingly premature but never increasing baldness, a slight moustache, apple cheeks, blue eyes, an air of candour. Such was the Secretary of the

<sup>1</sup> Those present at the first session of the Conference were: British. Mr. Lloyd George, General Robertson, Sir Douglas Haig, General Geddes, Sir Maurice Hankey; French: M. Briand, General Lyautey, General Nivelle, M. Clavelle, General Ragueneau (Head of the Railway Section at the G.Q.G.), Colonel Delmas, Commandant Bertier de Sauvigny, Captain de Suzannet.

War Cabinet, of all Cabinets, of all Prime Ministers, equally trusted and relied upon by all. I think it was Mr. Asquith who described him as the cement that bound all Cabinets together, and it was true. Attending every meeting, where he took down everything in longhand, prepared minutes and dealt with every conceivable matter with the industry of a continental housemaid, he was never ruffled, never out of temper, only a little in a hurry sometimes, rushing off with a roll of the upper body, torso well forward, using his elbows as if he were pushing his way through a crowd. His voice was musical, his sentences balanced. He has probably never said a foolish thing in his life, betrayed a secret, made a tactless remark or spoken out of turn. I have often thought that in the next world he will certainly be selected to help St. Peter in his arduous duties. He will put difficult questions so as to cause the minimum of embarrassment, and always he will be writing, in longhand, in an enormous book.

The proceedings began in a curious atmosphere of unreality. The desultory form of the discussion confirmed the British soldiers in their preconceived view that the conference was a waste of time. It struck them as strange that the Ministers, having insisted on the meeting, should be so little interested in the matter under review, namely transport.

General Geddes set forth his demands. The British needed, as a minimum, transport to carry 300,000 tons a week, 200,000 of which came from England.

The French experts, Monsieur Claveille, Under Secretary at the Ministry of Transport, and General Ragueneau, answered him. They assured him that his needs would be satisfied by the end of March, when certain necessary work on which every effort was being concentrated would be terminated.

But this did not satisfy Sir Douglas Haig. He required three weeks of maximum transport before he could launch his attack. General Nivelle chimed in to say he thought this unnecessarily long. The discussion became general and ran none too smoothly between the soldiers and technicians of both armies, on the subject of the amount of material to be moved both before and during the different phases of the attack.

Every point was translated with admirable lucidity and rapidity by the French Officer-Interpreter Mantoux, whose mind worked quickly

and who knew how to emphasize, omit or improve the statements of his own people. Short, stoutish, with brown hair, reddish-brown pointed beard and very brown eyes with red gleams in them, he looked like a plump and irascible mongoose.

General Nivelle then proceeded to deliver what sounded like a set oration. A little cough drew attention to the fact that he was about to speak.

Once more he affirmed his absolute faith in his plan, his certainty of the rapid success of the two first phases of the offensive. He spoke in French. 'I can admit,' he said, 'exceptional needs in transport during the critical period. But this will not continue longer than a fortnight. I guarantee this. Either we shall fail to break through in a fortnight, in which case I shall stop: there can no longer be any question of frontal attacks indefinitely prolonged as on the Somme; or we shall break through, and then for some time needs will be less, for in the main we shall be forced to use motor transport.'

He paused. Apparently he had said his say, but to some of those present it seemed rather as if he had stopped in the middle of a sentence.

There was an awkward silence, broken, so Sir William Robertson told me, by Mr. Lloyd George, who sat back deliberately, pursed his lips, and taking off his pince-nez over which he had been looking as he leant over the table, began beating a slow measure with them above his comfortably-rounded little waistcoat. Looking across at Monsieur Briand, he suggested that the specialists should form themselves into a sub-committee and endeavour to come to an understanding on the transport question. If they failed to reach an agreement, the conference would have to take a decision on the merits of the case. Meanwhile it was tea-time. Could not the representatives of the two Governments meet again a little later, say at 5.30? There were matters they had to discuss. If Monsieur Briand agreed, the two Commanders-in-Chief and General Robertson as the adviser to the British Government could be present also. Monsieur Briand unctuously declared himself in favour of this suggestion.

There was a general shuffle and moving of chairs as the procession of generals and transport experts left the room to find other quarters in which to vent their spleen by an acrimonious exchange of statistics, a brusque bandying of time-tables, and tart remarks concerning rolling-stock and permanent ways.

When the conference reassembled at 5.30 it consisted only of Mr.

Lloyd George, Monsieur Briand, General Lyautey, General Nivelle, Sir Douglas Haig, General Robertson, and of course Hankey and the indispensable Mantoux, for the two Prime Ministers who understood each other so well spoke not a word of each other's language.

General Nivelle, on being invited to do so by Mr. Lloyd George, began to speak. He went over the old ground, described Joffre's plan and explained why he had modified it in the light of the new knowledge he had acquired at Verdun. He then entered into a detailed explanation of his own scheme.

Sir Douglas Haig, asked for an opinion, said that he accepted this in its main principles; whereupon the two Prime Ministers declared that they accepted it also.

It was then Mr. Lloyd George's turn. Something in his manner made the British soldiers uneasy. They felt that they were not going to like what was coming, and they were right.

Without preamble he flung the question of the single command into the discussion. 'The enemy,' he said, 'has but one army. The Entente Powers should secure for themselves the same advantage, especially in battle. If we do not do this we cannot hope for complete success.' He went on to ask General Nivelle if he had any proposals to make. 'Let us speak with the utmost frankness,' he said. 'Let no one hesitate to give his opinion as to the best organization to adopt for our common action. All personal considerations must be laid aside. There is no room either for circumlocution or false delicacy.'

Monsieur Briand, in his deep melodious voice that had such a curious way of first riveting attention then of mesmerizing his hearers, gave his blessing to these utterances. He added that he hoped the two Commanders-in-Chief would express their views without ambiguity, and that all the Governments would have to do would be to register the fact of their agreement.

General Nivelle then began a long panegyric of the British Commander-in-Chief. He said that he had always acted in complete agreement with Sir Douglas Haig and had no doubt that this understanding would prevail during the forthcoming operations. Nevertheless, he added, the relationship of the two Commanders-in-Chief should, in his opinion, be regulated and defined by a formal and precise convention which would be binding on their successors should one of them disappear during the course of the forthcoming battle.



It was evident that this speech was not what Mr. Lloyd George had expected. He showed signs of impatience and asked General Nivelle to be more precise and to define his meaning. Thus pressed the Frenchman came to the point. Unity of direction, he said, was indispensable not only during the battle itself but during the preparations for it, as well as later when the success was being exploited.

The British generals were astonished. Such a point of view seemed to be in flat contradiction to Nivelle's adulation of Haig and professed satisfaction with their collaboration.

Mr. Lloyd George seemed much interested in General Nivelle's proposal, but considered it would require consideration by all concerned. Would he put his suggestions in writing? The conference could adjourn to give him time to prepare a concrete plan. Could he do this? General Nivelle thought that he could. The English soldiers said not a word.

Again there was a shuffling of chairs as the company got up to go; but Monsieur Briand had one more word to say. Adroit negotiator that he was, he saw that a point had been half scored and wished to consolidate it. His words were carefully transcribed by the interpreter in the minutes of the conference which are now at the French Foreign Office. He wished, he said, before the conference adjourned, to have it put on record that there was perfect harmony between all its members on the principle of unity of command during the forthcoming operations. Perhaps the British generals considered it inopportune to take up this statement, made at the very last moment; perhaps only Monsieur Mantoux heard it. In any case they made no comment. They decided to await General Nivelle's proposals. Until they heard these there was nothing to discuss, even amongst themselves.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE CALAIS CONFERENCE—II

THE conference so far had not worked out as had been intended by its promoters. The monstrous farce, planned in the spirit that had led members of the Borgia family to ask people to dinner and introduce cowed monks at dessert to administer supreme unction, with the announcement that all the guests had been poisoned, had suffered from lack of rehearsal. Nivelle had not taken his cue. He had prepared a memorandum embodying the proposal that the British Army should be placed under his command but had failed to produce it. As for the British generals, mere supers in the harlequinade, they were puzzled and not a little suspicious. They surmised that something was afoot but had no inkling what it was.

Before dinner Mr. Lloyd George and Hankey went for a long walk to the drab outskirts of the dreary town of Calais.

On returning to the hotel Mr. Lloyd George went to his rooms. Soon afterwards, at about 8 p.m., he was joined there by M. Briand and Generals Nivelle and Lyautey. They handed him General Nivelle's proposals and translated them to him.

(1) By delegation of the British War Cabinet, with the consent of the French War Committee, and with the object of assuring unity of command on the Western Front, the French Commander-in-Chief will, as from March 1st, have command over the British forces operating on this [the Western] Front, in all matters affecting the conduct of the operations.

And in particular

The planning and execution of offensive and defensive actions.

The grouping of forces in Armies and Groups of Armies.

The boundaries between these large units.

The distribution of supplies, materials and resources between the Armies.

(2) The French Commander-in-Chief will have a British Chief of Staff who will reside at the G.Q.G.

This Chief of Staff will have under his orders:—

(a) A General Staff charged with studying questions of operations and the relations with the British War Cabinet.

(b) The Quartermaster General.

It will be his duty to keep the British War Cabinet informed of the situation of the British Armies, and to transmit to it the demands made by the French Commander-in-Chief in regard to the needs of those Armies.

He will transmit to the British Commander-in-Chief, to the Army Commanders or the Commanders of Groups of Armies operating independently, the directions and instructions of the French Commander-in-Chief.

Under the authority of this Chief of Staff, the Quartermaster General will be charged with distributing supplies of all kinds between the British Armies, and with giving the Director General of Transport the necessary orders.

(3) Questions of personnel and discipline generally in the British Armies will be regulated by the British Commander-in-Chief, the Army Commanders or the Commanders of independent Groups of Armies, and by the British Chief of the General Staff, according to the duties prescribed to him by the War Office.

(4) The composition and functioning of the British General Staff attached to the French Commander-in-Chief will be fixed by agreement between Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and General Nivelle.

(5) In the event of the French Commander-in-Chief disappearing, his functions will pass to the new French Commander-in-Chief unless and until a new decision has been taken by the two War Cabinets.

This extraordinary document does not seem to have aroused Mr. Lloyd George's indignation, for apparently he made no protest. The Frenchmen were left with the impression that in the main it accorded with his conception of the change he meant to introduce in the system of command. He gave no indication of having realized that the French were claiming a mile for the inch he had surreptitiously offered them.

Sir Douglas Haig also had gone for a walk and on his return had a pleasant and cheerful meal with Generals Nivelle and Lyautey. General Kiggell, the Chief of the General Staff, arrived from Montreuil after the others had finished dinner. While he was being served, Sir Douglas came up and chatted with him for some time. Kiggell had just returned from Gough's Headquarters. He had gone there to endeavour to form an impression as to whether the Germans were going to withdraw to the Hindenburg Line or not. General Butler, the Deputy

Chief of the General Staff, had gone to the Fourth Army on a similar mission and had seen Kiggell before the latter started for Calais. Kiggell told Sir Douglas that he and Butler both thought the Germans were going to withdraw, but further reports were expected shortly.

General Robertson dined with General Mauric. As he finished he was handed a translation of the Nivelles proposals. As a stimulus to good digestion they were a failure. Wully's face went the colour of mahogany, his eyes became perfectly round, his eyebrows slanted outwards like a forest of bayonets held at the charge — in fact he showed every sign of having a fit. 'Get 'Aig', he bellowed to The Monument. When Sir Douglas arrived he was shown the paper.

The soldiers looked at each other speechless. Seldom in history can Englishmen have been asked to subscribe to such abject conditions. It seemed incredible that the greatest army we had ever sent abroad, now at the height of its power and absolutely confident of its superiority over the enemy, should be confronted with terms such as might be imposed on a vassal state. Not only was all military initiative taken from the British, but even food, munitions and weapons were to be distributed under the authority of the French Commander-in-Chief, his heirs and successors. The one power to be left to the British Commander-in-Chief was that of administering discipline. He would only differ from the Provost Marshal in that, presumably, his would be the duty, over and above that of court-martialing delinquents, of seeing that everyone in the British Army obeyed the orders of his French master.

The evil results of the plan having been hatched in secret were evident now. With none to warn them of the effect of their proposals on the British Army, the French had allowed a perfectly defensible idea to run away with them. Starting from false premises, but logically developed, the scheme had grown ever more precise in its fantastic assumptions, until the British Army, in the minds of those who worked it out, had ceased to exist as an entity. Its Commander-in-Chief had become a cipher, and its units were to be dispersed at the will of the French Command, like the Senegalese regiments, like the Moroccans, like the Foreign Legion, until its massed thousands had become mere khaki pawns scattered amongst the sky-blue pawns on the immense front controlled by the French from the North Sea to Switzerland. So complete and disgraceful was our surrender to be, so absolute our subservience to the

French Command, that the British Army was not even to be allowed to keep in direct touch with England. Communications between the army and the War Cabinet were to pass through a Chief of Staff resident at the G.Q.G. This officer was to be the French Commander-in-Chief's English voice when he gave his orders to Sir Douglas Haig, or informed the British War Office of the British Army's requirements; and the French intended to make sure that he would be a willing instrument in their hands.

So that no pretext for direct communication between our army and our War Office should exist, the Quartermaster General was to form part of the helot British Staff which General Nivelle proposed to create at his own Headquarters.

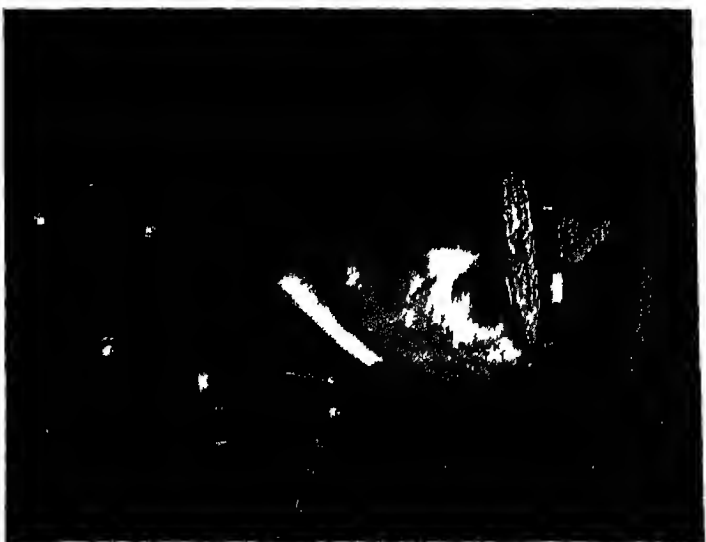
The French proposals were certainly less than generous to an army that had proved a loyal ally for two and a half years and had shed its blood unstintingly in defence of the soil of France. The only excuse that can be made for them is that General Nivelle genuinely believed that their underlying principles carried out Mr. Lloyd George's intentions and those of the British Cabinet. Nevertheless it is impossible not to feel that the marked dissonance between Nivelle's protestations of admiration and friendship for Sir Douglas Haig, earlier that day, and the plan he now put forward whereby the British Commander-in-Chief was to be dispossessed of the means of commanding his own army, speak ill for his sincerity.

General Robertson, ten years after that night, could not master his anger when he recalled it. His eyes would grow dark and his eyebrows bristle as with the eye of memory he gazed once more on General Nivelle's proposals.

He and Sir Douglas Haig were particularly ill-fitted by temperament to consider with detachment suggestions which would have exasperated any officer holding the King's Commission. Robertson, the ex-private, had bred in his bones the rough popular dislike and distrust of anything foreign, the instinctive sense of superiority over all other races. Haig, also typical of his kind, a man of breeding, was particularly aloof, sheltered within a thick shell of protective shyness, which had always made his relationship with the French particularly difficult. Military harness had worn deep furrows in the shoulders of both, military discipline and custom had coated them with its veneer, giving them a semblance of uniformity as did the clothes they wore, but in essence they were different and reacted differently to a shock and a blow equally hurting to both.



HENRY WILSON



WULLY ROBERTSON



The C.I.G.S. was too angry, the Commander-in-Chief too hurt, to treat the Nivelle paper with the calm contempt it deserved and expose quietly its ridiculous pretensions, its fantastic assumptions. They had little to say to each other concerning the paper itself. Both rejected it as totally unacceptable. It was necessary to make this clear to the Prime Minister without loss of time, so at about 10 p.m. they went to his room. They found Hankey there; he had come in a few moments before.

Mr. Lloyd George asked General Robertson if he had read General Nivelle's memorandum. He added that General Nivelle and the French Ministers *insisted* that the British Chief of Staff attached to the French Commander-in-Chief should be General Henry Wilson. To the soldiers this remark crossed every 't' and dotted every 'i' in the Nivelle scheme. The fact that the Prime Minister himself put forward this demand convinced them that he fully endorsed the proposals. Mr. Lloyd George's manner was emphatic, his voice aggressive, he was in fighting mood.

This was not the last blow General Robertson was to receive. He had believed that the whole plot had been hatched that afternoon at Calais, and that he was playing a strong card when he asked whether the War Cabinet had been consulted. He felt the ground opening under his feet when Mr. Lloyd George informed him that the question of the single command had been specifically considered by the War Cabinet on the previous Saturday, and that it had been decided that the British armies were to be placed under the French Commander-in-Chief, who would issue orders to Sir Douglas Haig as if he were the Commander of a Group of French Armies.<sup>1</sup> Wully growled with the plebeian rage of an English crowd when the referee has given an unjust decision against the home team in a vital match. Sir Douglas remained very silent, hardly speaking, while the C.I.G.S. went through the French memorandum paragraph by paragraph. His remarks were very blunt. Mr. Lloyd George, obviously getting angrier and angrier, nevertheless conceded that the proposals went farther than he had intended. Some of General Robertson's questions, shot out like the blows of a fist, were hard to answer.

Had the Dominions been consulted? Would they consent to their

<sup>1</sup> It seems clear the War Cabinet did not suspect what sort of a formula was to be drawn up. The whole initiative came from Mr. Lloyd George who obtained *carte blanche* from the War Cabinet.



troops being handed over to a French general? Was it constitutionally possible to place British troops under a foreigner? To whom would General Nivelle be responsible for the safety of the British Army? To the French Cabinet?

Mr. Lloyd George repeated with great asperity that he was determined, and had Cabinet support for stating, that whatever arguments might be adduced against the proposal, there must be no mistake about the main fact: the French Commander-in-Chief must be the effective Commander, and must have the power to move British troops wherever he thought fit.

The atmosphere became more and more tense. The Prime Minister's manner was dictatorial. General Robertson could hardly control his voice as he rumbled his objections. Finally Mr. Lloyd George lost his temper. He got very red and his eyes flashed dangerously. He declared with great heat that the scheme must go through. These were the orders of the Government. 'You must have worked out a scheme and be in agreement with the French by 8 o'clock to-morrow morning,' he told the soldiers. Then, saying he had a sick headache, he showed them the door. Robertson and Haig, thinking Hankey had had a hand in the intrigue, or that he was at least conversant with the plot, cold-shouldered him and hardly spoke to him.

After some discussion in Robertson's room, Haig decided to leave him and Maurice to see what they could evolve while he thought over the position in his own quarters. Robertson's first impulse was to resign, but he realized that the army needed defending now as never before, and that if he went there would be no one with the strength to prevent irremediable harm being done.

Maurice set to work on a counter-proposal which he submitted to his chief, and together they took it to Haig. They found him very unwilling to discuss it. He was reluctant to participate in the negotiations, or even to make suggestions. He said several times that this was a political matter which concerned the C.I.G.S. and not himself, that it was in fact a discussion concerning the appointment of a Commander-in-Chief, and that therefore he could not take part in it. This was quite a correct point of view, but it increased the difficulties of the soldiers from the War Office, who felt their position would be much weaker without the support of the Commander-in-Chief. The fact was that Sir Douglas had not only been frightfully hurt, but felt that Mr. Lloyd George would consider any objection

he might make was inspired merely by a desire to safeguard his own position as Commander-in-Chief.

General Robertson, rather disappointed but coming to the conclusion that it was both impossible and improper to deal with so vital a matter in a few hours, went to bed. General Maurice went on working.

Hankey also was hard at work. Better than anyone else perhaps, he grasped the seriousness of the situation. He knew that the War Cabinet had been prepared to allow the British Army to be placed under General Nivelle's direction for the actual period of the forthcoming operations, but he must also have been certain that they would not accept the French plan. He must have realized that Mr. Lloyd George had committed himself very far, farther perhaps than he understood, and that he would find it very difficult to withdraw; in fact he could not do so altogether. On the other hand, if he accepted the French plan, or anything like it, he would be repudiated by the War Cabinet and this would mean the fall of the Government. Hankey's problem was therefore to find a formula that would go far enough to save Mr. Lloyd George's face and at the same time be acceptable to the War Cabinet.

Hour after hour he sat up trying to find a way out. Next morning he had Sylvester, his confidential shorthand writer, out of bed by 7 a.m. to type the draft he had prepared during the night.

The soldiers were up earlier still. General Robertson summoned Maurice between two and three to discuss what had best be done.

Soon after 6 a.m., he sent The Monument to ask General Nivelle if he might come to see him. The French Commander-in-Chief, who was already dressed, said he would come himself to see Sir William, and followed Lucas to his room.

Those who knew Wully will not be surprised to hear that he went straight to the point. Why had not the scheme read out the previous night been submitted to him? How came it he had not been informed of it beforehand?

General Nivelle looked extremely, even painfully, astonished. '*Comment?*' he exclaimed, 'You did not know?' It was his Government, he explained, that had ordered him to draw up a scheme to lay before the conference. He had been told that the British Prime Minister approved of it. It had never occurred to him that Sir William did not know all about it. How could he have thought so? '*Je n'y suis pour rien,*' he declared with tears in his eyes.

The British soldiers believed him absolutely. Indeed it seemed to them impossible that a French general should suppose that the British Government intended to make use of him to spring such a surprise on its responsible military advisers. General Nivelle's words and his whole attitude convinced Sir William Robertson of his good faith. The impression he conveyed was that not only was he entirely innocent of having attempted to take his British colleagues unawares, but that the whole plan had been imposed upon him by the politicians. Sir William Robertson never knew, what the French Official History now makes clear, that General Nivelle's plan had been drawn up not, as the British soldiers believed and as the French Commander-in-Chief implied, on the eve of the conference, but at his own Headquarters as far back as February 21st. Nor, until Colonel Herbillon, the liaison officer between General Nivelle and the Government, published his *War Memories*, was it known that Jules Cambon, fully aware of the plan to subordinate the British Commander-in-Chief to his French colleagues, had sent a personal message to General Nivelle enjoining him not to give way at the Calais Conference, but to *insist* on being given command over the British. He informed Nivelle that he was communicating in this sense with his brother, Paul Cambon, the French Ambassador in London.

So anxious was Nivelle to emphasize his entire innocence of anything underhand that after breakfast he asked to see General Robertson again. The C.I.G.S., characteristically, not having anything more to say to him, and apt to find early morning conversations even with his own compatriots uncongenial, sent General Maurice to see him.

Nivelle told Maurice he could not bear that there should be any shadow of misunderstanding between himself and his British colleagues. He was therefore anxious to explain exactly what had occurred.

He had heard that the British Prime Minister intended to place Sir Douglas under his orders a fortnight ago. Bertier de Sauvigny after an interview with the Prime Minister on February 15th had sent him a report to this effect. It had never occurred to him that the War Office was not aware of this.

It had all been settled, he thought, by the two Cabinets; when told to prepare a paper for the conference he had done so, embodying what he had been led to believe were the principles settled by the

Governments. French and British Ministers had, he understood, been in touch with each other right up to the conference.

General Maurice was astounded. Bertier de Sauvigny, he said, was by his orders given access to all papers and plans in his department. He was treated as one of themselves. General Maurice had told him that he could consider himself as a member of the British General Staff. He was not accredited to nor had he any business to have any communication with Ministers, any more than a British officer would. General Maurice, consulting his diary, found that he had actually received Bertier de Sauvigny on the day he had seen the Prime Minister. The intention to conceal from the soldiers the plan of the politicians was evident. On whose instructions had Bertier de Sauvigny acted? General Nivelle was volubly insistent that it had not been on his. '*C'est un intrigant,*' he cried. 'I shall recall him and send him to the front.' And this in due course was indeed what happened (but not until General Nivelle had ceased to be Commander-in-Chief of the French armies).

This conversation gave General Nivelle a further opportunity of asserting his friendly feelings towards Haig. He told Maurice that he had extolled Sir Douglas to the politicians the night before, and reasserted his determination to maintain the relations between them on the same footing of cordiality in the future. 'We have been excellent collaborators and must remain so. Anything else is unthinkable.'

An entry in Monsieur Poincaré's *Memoirs* sheds a curious light on these words and on General Nivelle's assumption of injured innocence. On February 25th, the day before the conference, the French Commander-in-Chief lunched with the President in his train at Beauvais. Monsieur Poincaré gives in his diary the following account of their conversation:

Nivelle believes that if Douglas Haig remains at the head of the British Army, the relations will always remain courteous, but that we shall not obtain a real subordination of the British Army to the French Command. He believes a change in the command to be necessary. This is, at heart, Lloyd George's desire.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Ribot in his *Journal* (p. 49) quotes a letter written by Monsieur Paul Cambon on March 27th, 1917.

'Lloyd George detests Sir D. Haig concerning whom he is very critical, but Haig's position with the War Office and the public is very strong. Lloyd George wants to get rid of him but cannot do so. His idea is to ask for the replacement of the English General and to cover himself by a *démarche* of the [French] Commander-in-Chief.

While Maurice was with Nivelle, Hankey came to see Robertson. If the C.I.G.S. was feeling somewhat appeased as far as the French soldiers were concerned, his exasperation with the politicians and with his own Prime Minister in particular had in no way abated. This is probably why Hankey deemed it inexpedient to attempt to discuss the position with him or to show him his draft suggestions. Skilfully manœuvring in retreat towards the door, he went to join Mr. Lloyd George at breakfast.

Before going to see the Prime Minister, Robertson and Maurice went again to see Sir Douglas Haig. Although still inclined to stand aside from the discussion, he had prepared a memorandum to the effect that in his opinion only two courses were open:

1. To leave matters as they were, or
2. To place the British armies entirely under the French Commander-in-Chief.

The decision to adopt the second of these proposals [he wrote] must involve the disappearance of the British Commander-in-Chief and G.H.Q. What further changes would be necessary must depend on the French Commander-in-Chief and the French Government under whom he acts.

So drastic a change in our system at a moment when active operations on a large scale (i.e. the enemy's withdrawal on the Ancre) have already commenced seems to me to be fraught with the gravest danger.

Mr. Lloyd George had sent a message inviting the generals to breakfast, but they all asked to be excused. Hankey therefore was alone with him during the meal. He seems to have taken the opportunity to produce the paper he had worked out during the night, which Mr. Lloyd George later used as a basis for discussion.

Mr. Lloyd George sent for the C.I.G.S., who arrived with General Maurice bringing Sir Douglas Haig's memorandum. The Prime Minister was exasperated by Sir Douglas's attitude. It was just what he had expected: technical difficulties were, he said, being invoked to defeat the decision taken by the War Cabinet. Wully was not easily overridden, however, and he never fought so hard as when defending Haig. He was fighting a rearguard action now, but a highly aggressive one. He did not hesitate to speak his mind at having been kept in ignorance of the Government's decision. He pressed the Prime Minister hard to find out exactly what had been

decided by the War Cabinet, but he did not succeed in pinning him down to anything concrete.

He argued that General Nivelle was totally inexperienced in handling large bodies of troops; that he had done well at Verdun was no proof that he had the capacity to command the whole of the Allied armies in France.

Robertson tried to make Mr. Lloyd George understand how disastrous it would be to place British soldiers directly under a foreign general. How could this Frenchman be made responsible for the safety of what were to all intents and purposes the total forces of Britain and of the Empire? How could the Commander of one army place the safety of another on exactly the same footing as his own? If there were an equal danger to Paris and the Channel Ports, where would General Nivelle mass his reserves?

Finding psychological arguments of little avail, Robertson, returning to some of those he had used the night before, asked again: What would the Dominions say? Would they consent to the proposed arrangements? Was it constitutional to place British soldiers under anyone not holding the King's Commission?

Mr. Lloyd George was not impressed by these arguments either. He produced Hankey's draft, which was a very great improvement on the French project and in particular differed from it in one fundamental respect; it limited the period of General Nivelle's command over the British armies to the duration of the forthcoming operations. General Robertson was not mollified, and again the Prime Minister lost his temper. He said that at the request of the War Cabinet he had come to Calais to see that their decision to place Nivelle in supreme command of the Allied armies was carried out, and that if the soldiers were obstructive he would break up the conference and return to London. The Cabinet would then have to act.

Hands in belt, his enormous eyebrows bristling, flat-footed and raging, Robertson propelled himself out of the room. His movements were those of a charging elephant depicted in a slow-motion picture. Again he contemplated resignation, but after a talk with Maurice he thought better of it.

The latter had had an idea, of which, when he had fully realized its implications, the C.I.G.S. saw all the possibilities. It was this. The French contingent in the Dardanelles under General Gouraud had been in very much the same relation to the British Commander-

in-Chief as Mr. Lloyd George wanted the British Army to be in relation to Nivelles, but the French Cabinet had insisted that Gouraud should have the right of appeal to his own Government. He was to conform to the orders he received from the British Commander-in-Chief, but he had the right to appeal to Paris should those orders in his opinion imperil the safety of his troops. What was sauce for the French goose in the Dardanelles was also sauce for the British gander in France, argued General Maurice, who telephoned to the War Office to ask for the exact text of the agreement.

Hankey now appeared, and this time was better received. He proceeded to pour oil on the troubled waters, explained the reasons for the different clauses in the Prime Minister's draft (he never even hinted it was his own) and, when told of General Maurice's idea, undertook to urge Mr. Lloyd George to embody it in what may be called the Lloyd George draft, since he fathered it.

General Robertson strode off in search of Haig to show this to him. Haig meanwhile had been invited by General Lyautey to come and see him. Going to his room, Haig found him in the company of General Nivelles. The object of the interview was to assure the Commander-in-Chief, as Sir William Robertson had already been assured, that the French soldiers were in no way responsible for the most unpleasant situation in which they realized the British generals found themselves. Both assured Haig that they had not seen the French memorandum until 'quite recently', a statement which on General Nivelles's part was sheer prevarication, but which was certainly true of General Lyautey, who declared that the paper had only been shown him in the train on the way from Paris to Calais.

Sir Douglas's mind was considerably relieved by this interview. It meant much to him to feel he could count on the loyalty of the French soldiers.

On his return to his own rooms he was shown the Lloyd George proposals by Robertson, who left them with him.

In the meantime General Maurice had seen General Davidson, the Head of the Operations section at G.H.Q., who brought very interesting news. The Fifth Army (Gough's) reported that the Germans had carried out a further withdrawal during the night. The two men discussed this and both came to the conclusion that it now seemed certain that the Germans were going to withdraw to the Hindenburg Line.

Maurice reported this to Robertson, and they had another talk

in which they decided that the great thing was to bring the conference to an end as soon as possible and to aim at getting back to London without any irretrievable step having been taken. The news of the German retreat was of vital importance. It might well upset all Nivelle's plans and show him to have been completely wrong in every respect. The time-limit suggested by Mr. Lloyd George would in that case prove to be a saving clause. Then also in London other influences could be brought to bear. For the moment it was all important to get away from Calais, losing as few feathers as possible.

There was now a constant movement from room to room. General Lyautey came to see General Robertson to tell him what he had already told Haig. He did not seem particularly happy about the relationship between the French War Office and the G.Q.G. He was a newcomer, he said, and knew only what General Nivelle chose to tell him. He went away still evidently much troubled. He could not bear even the suggestion of anything underhand. Behind him he left, as he always did, the impression of a soldier and a man of great integrity.

More visits followed the receipt of Sir Douglas's counter-proposals to the Lloyd George draft. These from Robertson's point of view were not helpful, for the form of words suggested would have had the effect of leaving things much as they were, which Robertson, after his talk with Hankey, realized would not do.

Judging that Sir Douglas was unlikely to be moved from the position he had taken up, and in any case always averse to making any attempt to influence him, Robertson abstained from further comment, merely saying he would show Sir Douglas's memorandum to the Prime Minister. He again asked to be received by Mr. Lloyd George, and went back to the Prime Minister's room accompanied by General Maurice. The discussion that followed was prolonged, but the atmosphere, though tense, was less charged with electricity than earlier in the morning. Wully was evidently beginning to see a way out of the impasse, and besides he now felt that he had a rod or two in pickle for the Prime Minister.

Haig's amendments to the British counter-proposals were first considered. Mr. Lloyd George saw at once that these merely meant returning to the 'as you were' position. He put Robertson the direct question — 'Would Haig's proposals have the effect of negating the idea underlying the French plan embodied in his own



memorandum,' and the latter had to agree that they would; so Mr. Lloyd George, not unnaturally, refused even to consider them. This attitude was exactly what Wully had expected, so it left him comparatively unruffled. On the other hand he was much relieved to find that, no doubt owing to the good work done by Hankey, the Prime Minister consented to the same form of words being inserted in the agreement as had been used by the French Government in their instructions to General Gouraud.

This point having been gained, Mr. Lloyd George himself underlined the fact that Sir Douglas was to be subordinated to General Nivelle only during the period of the forthcoming operations. He spoke of this as a trial period. This aspect of Hankey's paper evidently appealed to him. He also finally agreed, after considerable discussion, that the suggestion put forward by the French that there should be a British Staff and a Quartermaster General at the G.Q.G. should be negatived. It was decided that instead a more senior officer than the present Head of the Mission attached to the G.Q.G. should be appointed, and that he should have a 'Q' officer on his Staff.

Before passing the draft agreement, the Prime Minister asked General Robertson if by its terms 'Sir Douglas Haig was compelled to obey Nivelle's orders like a French Commander,' to which Robertson answered that he was.

The agreement as finally accepted by the Prime Minister and General Robertson was as follows:

1. The French War Committee and the British War Cabinet approve the plan of operations on the Western Front explained to them on the 26th February, 1917, by General Nivelle and Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig.
2. So as to ensure complete unity of command during the coming operations on the Western Front, the British War Cabinet and the French War Committee, in complete agreement, have decided as follows:—

(i) It being understood that the essential object of the forthcoming operations on the Western Front is to clear the enemy off French soil, and as the French Army has larger numbers of effectives than the British armies, the British War Cabinet recognizes that the general direction of the campaign should be in the charge of the Commander-in-Chief of the French Army.

(ii) With this object, the British War Cabinet undertakes

to give instructions to the Field Marshal commanding the British Expeditionary Force to make his plan of operations conform to the general strategic plan of the Commander-in-Chief of the French Army.

3. For the period comprised between the signing of the present convention and the beginning of the operations, the British War Cabinet undertakes, further, to give the Field Marshal commanding the British Expeditionary Force orders to conform to the views of the French Commander-in-Chief, except in the case where he might consider that in conforming to them he would compromise the safety of his army. In the case of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig feeling bound, for this reason, not to carry out General Nivelle's instructions, he should address a report explaining his attitude and the reasons which led him to it, to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, for communication to the British War Cabinet.
4. The British War Cabinet undertakes, further, to give the Field Marshal commanding the British Expeditionary Force the following instructions:—

From the date when the forthcoming operations on the Western Front begin, and until those operations are terminated, he is to carry out the orders of the Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, in all that relates to the conduct of the operations, it being understood, however, that the Commander of the British Armies will be free to choose the means to be employed and the manner in which his troops will be utilized in the zone of operations allotted to him in the original plan of operations by the French Commander-in-Chief.

5. The British Commander-in-Chief and the French Commander-in-Chief, each in regard to his own army, shall remain judge of when the operations shall be considered to have terminated. At that moment, the arrangements in force before the beginning of that period will once more hold good in every respect.

This draft was submitted to Haig, who raised many objections to it, but finally and very reluctantly took Wully's advice and said he would accept it. It was then shown to Nivelle who agreed to it without demur. All that now remained to be done was to translate it into French. At 11 a.m. Ministers and soldiers were called together to sign it. This was the third and last session of the conference

It was the occasion of Briand's first public appearance that day. He had taken no obvious part in the earlier negotiations, but had spent most of the time in his room, gazing out of the window over the railway lines and wind-swept couch-grass and sand of the ramparts towards the sea, apparently indifferent to the continuous rushing about of the other members of the conference. From his loose under-lip hung a limp cigarette. To those who told him that there seemed to be great difficulties on the British side, he had answered — '*Bah, cela s'arrangera. On s'entend toujours avec Lloyd George.*' When the draft agreement was shown him he shrugged his shoulders. A good deal had been given away, well, the essence of negotiation was to give something away; the one thing that mattered was that the vital point should not be surrendered. His quick eye sought out the essential clause: Haig was to be subordinate to Nivelle. '*Bon, I will sign,*' he said.

At the conference table he appeared, shoulders bent, hair hanging untidily to either side of his face, hands in trouser pockets cut across the front, still looking incredibly bored, but now his boredom seemed to have a concrete cause, the deafness of General Lyautey.

The convention was solemnly read through in French and English by Mantoux. When he had finished, Briand, speaking with his usual musical drawl, said he would like to move an amendment which he believed would be an improvement. His suggestion was that the Governments and not the Commanders-in-Chief should be the judges as to when the operations had come to an end. This was agreed to, and accordingly paragraph five of the convention was amended to read: — 'The British War Cabinet and the French War Committee, each in regard to its own army, shall remain judge of when the operations shall be considered to have terminated,' etc.

Before the convention was actually signed, a last-minute attempt was made by the French, including General Lyautey, to get General Henry Wilson appointed to Beauvais, but this was brushed aside by Mr. Lloyd George, who was now anxious to wind up the proceedings. The Commanders-in-Chief must settle the matter between them, he declared.

Equally cavalier was his treatment of the vital question of transport. Although the conference had ostensibly been called to deal with it, no one took any interest in the problem except the bewildered experts, and no one thought of consulting them. The whole matter was dismissed in two sentences. The French Govern-

ment were to tell the British Government what was the maximum amount of rolling stock they could make available. The British Government would then see by how much its demands could be reduced. In fact, concluded the Prime Minister, General Nivelle would take his own decisions under his own responsibility. It would be much easier now that General Nivelle was in control of the operations. The railway experts might as well have stayed at home. Indeed Sir Eric Geddes seriously considered whether there was any point in his remaining in France.

Only one more obstacle now separated the impatient delegates from luncheon — Salonika; but that vexatious problem was not allowed to keep them long from the *hors-d'œuvres*. It was decided that 'as the co-operation of the Russo-Roumanian forces against Bulgaria is not yet possible, the conference is of opinion that the defeat of the Bulgarian Army is not for the present a practical objective, and that the task of the Allied forces at Salonika is to retain on their front the enemy forces, should the opportunity offer'.

Perhaps at the time someone understood what this meant. To-day it seems obscure. What was clear was that a few score thousand men were to remain where they were, at the tender mercy of their Commander, General Sarrail, and of malaria.

The signing of the convention was got through hurriedly, as was luncheon. Immediately afterwards the delegates dispersed, some to their headquarters, others to Paris or London. General Nivelle and the British soldiers parted on friendly terms, but no one left Calais in a happy frame of mind.

The weak parliamentary position of his Government was enough to preoccupy Monsieur Briand. General Nivelle's satisfaction at the immense powers conferred upon him was not unalloyed with doubts and anxieties. General Lyautey was perhaps the most content, and for this he had to thank his deafness. He had not heard all General Nivelle's protestations to his British colleagues, which would have made his straight and simple soul uneasy. He saw only one thing, that a single command had been set up, and this he believed to be right and wise. Being French it had never occurred to him that the Generalissimo could be other than a Frenchman. But one point troubled him: his growing doubts concerning Nivelle's capacity as a Commander.

The ship that conveyed the British contingent from Calais was large enough for the soldiers and the civilians to keep at the safe

distance at which looks do not kill. In London all dived into the waiting official cars without wasting any time in superfluous farewells.

Sir William Robertson drove straight to the War Office and ordered an immediate summoning of the Army Council to which he submitted the convention. He was supported in unmistakable terms on the constitutional question. It was laid down that in no circumstance could any but British officers be responsible for the safety of British soldiers.

He then proceeded to turn the icy douche of responsibility upon the Ministers. They and they alone must be prepared to face the consequence of a military decision of the first magnitude taken without consulting their military advisers. He drew up and circulated to the members of the War Cabinet a memorandum in which he made his own position clear, and explained that the fact that he had signed the Calais Convention<sup>1</sup> in no way meant he approved of placing the British armies under Nivelles; it merely indicated that, the decision having been taken independently of him, he had concurred in the method adopted for carrying it out. He went on to say that he had considered not signing it at all, but when told that this would lead to a break up of the conference and would seriously embarrass the Government, he had felt that this was a responsibility he was not entitled to take.

In conclusion, while assuring the War Cabinet that Sir Douglas Haig and himself would do their best to carry out the decisions arrived at, he used the alarming words:— 'The task will be very difficult and causes me grave anxiety as to our final success in the war.'

<sup>1</sup> In the official documents the terms 'Calais Convention' and 'Calais Agreement' are used indiscriminately. In the following pages I have followed this example.

## CHAPTER X

### HAIG AND NIVELLE

SIR DOUGLAS HAIG returned to Montreuil having made up his mind to carry out the Calais Agreement with complete loyalty. The Government had decided to place him under Nivelle for the forthcoming operations, well, he would prove that he could rise above personal feelings; it should never be said that the success of the operations had been compromised through pique on his part. What if some members of the British Cabinet had shown that they had little faith in him? The achievement of the troops under his command in the forthcoming offensive should prove them wrong.

Such was the reaction of a morally brave man, whose faith in himself and in the men he commanded enabled him, despite the deep wound he had received, to bend all his energy to the task in hand.

General Nivelle, on the other hand, was far from satisfied with the Calais Agreement, and his dissatisfaction was increased by the comments of those most closely associated with him at the G.Q.G. Once back at Beauvais where he was king, and surrounded by the concentric rings of the immense Staff to whom he must show himself to be the embodiment of will and action, he resolved to drop the rôle of innocent tool he had played at Calais and to re-establish by a direct assumption of power as much as possible of what had been whittled away by the sharp blade of General Robertson's criticism.

On February 27th, the very night of his return to his headquarters from Calais, he wrote a letter to Sir Douglas in which, after stating that the objective of the British armics was Cambrai and that they were to launch their attack on April 8th, he requested not only that the orders Sir Douglas had issued to his Armies should be sent to him, but also that he should be informed of the steps the Army Commanders were taking to carry them out.

The final paragraph of this letter was as follows:—

*Organization of the British Mission at my H.Q.*

As I told you verbally, and as was expressly understood at the last session of the Calais Conference, I consider it indispensable to give this Mission without delay the importance and the means of action suited to the rôle it must now play.

I ask you therefore to put General Wilson at the head of this Mission as soon as he returns from Russia.

Meanwhile until he can take up his functions, I should be obliged if you would temporarily send me General Davidson [Major General, Operations] unless you consider his presence at your headquarters to be indispensable, in which case I would ask you to designate another staff officer capable of doing the work for the time being.

I request you further to put at the disposal of the Head of the Mission:

- a. General Clive, who will be required to deal specially with Operations questions.
- b. A General Officer qualified to maintain permanent liaison between the French D.A. [*Direction de l'Arrière*] and your corresponding services [Quartermaster General and Director of Transport].
- c. As many liaison officers under the above-mentioned staff officers as the Head of the Mission may consider necessary.<sup>1</sup>

The claim made in this letter not only to control Sir Douglas Haig's own orders but to supervise over the head of the British Commander-in-Chief the way in which his subordinates carried them out, is one that would hardly have been made by Sir Douglas himself within his own army. He would have considered it undue interference to demand the right to criticize the orders issued by Corps Commanders in conformity with those of their Army Commanders.

Only one thing can be said in mitigation of this extraordinary demand; the French Higher Command exercised a control over subordinate formations which would have seemed intolerable to the British.

The demand made at Calais was emphasized and underlined in brutal fashion. The suggestion that General Davidson, one of the key men at G.H.Q., should be transferred to the G.Q.G. even temporarily, thus proving the helpless subservience of our Command to the French, is robbed of its monstrous implications by the fact that at Calais, when General Wilson's name was hurled at him, Sir Douglas Haig countered with that of General Davidson. Personally I believe that in doing so he was merely thinking in terms of individuals — that, confronted suddenly with a situation he found hard to grasp

<sup>1</sup> For the full text of this letter see Appendix X (page 547).

but which he felt was full of pitfalls, he had put forward the name of someone he could completely trust. The French Commander-in-Chief, on the other hand, was only too glad to seize the opportunity offered of taking from Sir Douglas his Director of Operations, for by doing so he could feel he really had his foot on Sir Douglas's neck.

I was at Montreuil the day after this letter was received, and I can bear witness to the disastrous effect it had there.

The expression 'to double cross' had not yet migrated across the Atlantic, but it accurately represents the thought that was passing through many minds at G.H.Q. There was far less anger than a deep feeling of disillusionment. The *camaraderie* cemented on so many battlefields, which in spite of occasional differences had grown steadily between the French and British armies, seemed for the time being to have disappeared.

I found myself tiptoeing down passages trying to look as if I had no business to put forward on behalf of the French.

My friend Armitage used to shake his head in a comic way and say: 'Spears, it's a bad war.' On this occasion he said so again, but now there was sadness instead of humour in his tone.

A day or two later I ran into General Nivelle while he was visiting the French First Army. He called me up to him, and in a bullying tone took me to task because, he said, the British preparations for the attack were not so far advanced as those of the French.

His manner was so changed that it seemed impossible this could be the same man who, when I last saw him, had shown himself such a courteous and affable gentleman.

What followed does not redound to my credit as a liaison officer. Although I was only a very junior major, I could not help showing that I resented General Nivelle's tone in a way I would not have done a few days earlier. I had looked upon the French Commander-in-Chief as the ancients might have looked upon some alien but powerful and much-respected god, but that feeling entirely disappeared from the moment that he dared to affront the only military deity a British officer could recognize, his own Commander-in-Chief.

I told General Nivelle that in spite of the serious shortcomings of certain French services on the lines of communication upon which we depended, instances of which I gave, our preparations were at least as far advanced as those of our French neighbours; then, well knowing that the most annoying thing it was possible to



mention to the French Commander-in-Chief was the probable German withdrawal on the G.A.N. front, I said: '*Mon Général*, supposing our preparations were not as far ahead as those of the G.A.N., which is not the case, would it really matter? There is not a battalion commander or an Intelligence officer on this front who is not certain that the Germans are *en train de déménager* (clearing out). They say there are only caretakers in the trenches opposite—for a long time now they have heard the enemy removing his goods and chattels. In these circumstances does it matter if the British preparations synchronize with those of the G.A.N. or not? We are, it seems, going to attack *dans le vide* (into emptiness).

'These are merely rumours,' snapped General Nivelle. He then stopped and stared at me hard. I think he was wondering whether I had meant to be deliberately impertinent and if he ought to do something about it. My face was, I hoped, quite wooden while I put into practice a tip given me years before by a Japanese officer who had been attached to my regiment. It had proved extremely useful, when, under the unpleasant necessity of standing strictly to attention, I had had to undergo a telling-off from a superior officer. It consisted in gazing with absorbed attention (but without moving the head) at the boots of your senior. You would then raise your eyes slowly to the level of his, dallying on the way up his person, revealing a puzzled expression as if you had detected the most serious disarrangement in his dress. The prescription was: repeat the process as often as necessary; it seldom failed.

General Nivelle tapped the ground with the toe of his heavy black artillery riding boot and looked as if he were going to say something, then suddenly turned on his heels, lifting his hand a couple of inches out of his pocket in acknowledgment of the magnificent salute I gave him. As he walked away I surmised by his movements that he was making sure all his buttons were fastened up.

The Commander-in-Chief gave further evidence of 'nerves' when General d'Esperey saw him at the G.Q.G. a few days later. He found him in a very emotional state, and full of distress concerning his differences with Haig. He evidently considered that he was in a very serious predicament. D'Esperey's account of the Commander-in-Chief's woes elicited little sympathy from the staff of the G.A.N., and Colonel Desticker told me that he considered Nivelle was

entirely to blame for the mess he was in. He had tried to be clever instead of being straight with his British colleague. 'Your people are the easiest in the world to get on with,' said Desticker. '*Mais il faut jouer cartes sur table avec eux.*'

The immediate reaction of Haig and his Staff to General Nivelle's letter was disgust at the way they had evidently been misled at Calais; but on consideration it was obvious that the letter contained a large element of bluff; for the gun the French Commander-in-Chief was levelling at their heads as if it were loaded with the deadly charge of the original French proposals could, they knew, contain nothing more lethal than the small shot of the signed convention.

It was decided that to delay sending an answer would be perhaps the most effective way of dealing with it. When a reply was sent, it should be made clear to Nivelle that he could have the convention, the whole convention, but nothing more than the convention.

Sir Douglas's first move was to send a copy of General Nivelle's letter to General Robertson, together with a covering letter (dated March 3rd)<sup>1</sup> and a memorandum (dated the 2nd)<sup>2</sup>. In this letter he stated that since the Calais Conference information had continued to come in, pointing to the conclusion that the enemy's retirement on the Ancre might be the prelude to a withdrawal on a large scale, and that this was probably linked with a carefully-thought-out offensive plan. If the enemy, he wrote, contemplated a desperate effort to retrieve the situation at the eleventh hour, such an attack was not unlikely to appeal to them.

The brunt of such an attack would fall in the first instance on the British armies and on the Belgians covering the left of those armies. The position of the British in the north was notoriously difficult and the line hard to hold against a determined attack by superior numbers. Even were we able to hold a frontal attack delivered under such conditions, our safety might be compromised by the Belgians on our left giving way.

The question arose therefore, in Sir Douglas's opinion, whether in view of this and other possibilities the intended Allied offensive should be launched in the belief that the enemy would thereby be deprived of the initiative and turned from his purpose.

The Germans must, in the Commander-in-Chief's opinion, have weighed these considerations and taken measures to deal with them.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XI (page 549).

<sup>2</sup> Appendix XII (page 551).

If so and if these measures proved adequate the situation would be serious.

Their plans, however, might miscarry, but before we embarked upon a course of action we should weigh carefully the risks involved and be prepared to meet them.

Sir Douglas went on to say that hitherto the necessary power and responsibility had been entrusted to him and he had been able to take whatever measures he deemed necessary for the security of his forces without finding it necessary to point out risks which it was his duty to foresee and guard against.

Now, however, under the recent decision of the War Cabinet, he had to consider the possibility of no longer being able to deal adequately with such an emergency as that to which he was now drawing attention, and which was certainly within the possibilities of the situation.

He therefore declared that he considered it necessary to report, under the provisions of paragraph three of the Calais Agreement, the steps he proposed to take to minimize as far as he could the possible dangers of the situation, and that these steps must unavoidably affect his offensive preparations.

He concluded by saying that he had not yet been able to ascertain General Nivelle's view but was sending him a paper he had drawn up on the subject. He could not tell whether factors affecting more immediately and directly British than French interests would carry as much relative importance in the French Commander-in-Chief's judgment as they necessarily did in his.

Thus four days had not passed before Sir Douglas was appealing to the Government under the saving clause of the Calais Convention.

The memorandum, like the letter, referred to the German withdrawal, and the same conclusions were drawn.

It pointed out that the enemy, by retiring to the new line now under construction known as the Hindenburg Line, would shorten his front by many miles and would set free several divisions for offensive purposes. It was known that he believed in a determined offensive on a wide scale as the only method of obtaining a quick decision, and conditions in Germany rendered such a decision desirable.

He would probably, in Sir Douglas's opinion, concentrate his maximum forces on the front selected for attack and would endeavour to gain time by delaying action elsewhere.

If this were the enemy's plan, it would render the preparations

already made by the Allies entirely nugatory and their attack would be little more than a blow in the air.

Which theatre were the Germans most likely to select for their offensive? A tactical success might be obtained in Russia more easily than on the Western Front, but a strategical success would be difficult to obtain there.

The weight of argument, concluded Sir Douglas, appeared to be in favour of the enemy's making a great effort on the Western Front.

He went on to say that, in his view, the enemy would obtain the greatest tactical success if he launched his attack after the French and British Armies were committed to theirs. His success would depend upon his power of delaying our offensive.

If it were true that the enemy meant to launch an offensive on the Western Front, which point would he select for his onslaught?

The views of the Field Marshal on this point may be summarized as follows:

There are no certain indications at the moment of where the enemy will attack, but an offensive between Lille and the sea is the most likely because:

1. It would cut off the British from the three ports in Northern France which are of vital importance to them.
2. It would fit in with the German submarine campaign and entail the most serious consequences.

The Ypres sector had always been a source of anxiety; it had become more so since the centre of gravity of the British Army had moved southwards owing to the extension of its line.

The railways on which the British would have to depend in an emergency were not under their control. The Calais Conference had deprived the British Commander-in-Chief of the disposal of his reserves at a critical time, and his hands were even somewhat tied in the matter of the disposition of his troops on his own front during the preparatory period.

Sir Douglas's deductions from these circumstances can be summarized thus:

1. The excellent defence of the enemy and the formation of numerous new divisions might enable him to obtain a decision before the Allies could do so.
2. In Sir Douglas's opinion it was doubtful if the Allied offensive could divert the Germans from their purpose whatever it might be.

3. He considered the safety of his army might be gravely compromised if it were engaged beyond recall in an operation which would prevent his meeting an attack in the north.

4. He was therefore of opinion that he must retain sufficient reserves in his own hands to meet such an emergency.

These official communications were followed on the 4th by a personal letter from Sir Douglas to Sir William Robertson which is interesting from many points of view; it shows how deep and genuine was his anxiety for his left, but it also makes it clear that he had reverted to his earlier and better opinion of Nivelle. His feelings of what a soldier could not and would never do, his own standards which he believed were universally accepted by those claiming to be officers and gentlemen, blinded him again to General Nivelle's real attitude, and blind he remained.

The French Commander-in-Chief had, he wrote, assured him several times that he had been *ordered* [underlined in text] by his Government to make the proposals he had put forward. Sir Douglas therefore thought his personal relations with the French Commander-in-Chief would continue to be friendly.

He asked that all the papers should be laid before the War Committee so that the *intentions* [underlined in text] of the French Government should be made known to them, and suggested that they should be definitely told that such proposals would not be entertained for a moment.

Rather pathetically he added that he thought it would be only fair to him that our Government should tell the French Government that he possessed their full confidence.

On the same day he wrote officially to the C.I.G.S. referring to the situation on his left [Second Army]. If the situation continued to develop on the present lines he would, he said, transfer reinforcements there at a very early date: labour was already on its way there.<sup>1</sup>

On March 4th the Field Marshal answered General Nivelle.<sup>2</sup> The tone of this communication was perfectly correct. Always completely loyal and meticulously careful in such matters, he sent General Nivelle a copy of the memorandum he had forwarded to the C.I.G.S. for submission to the War Cabinet. He explained in his letter that he had been studying the possibilities arising out of the enemy's withdrawal on the British Fifth Army front, combined with indications that he might be falling back to the Hindenburg Line.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XIII (page 556)

<sup>2</sup> Appendix XIV (page 557).

He stated definitely that, for the reasons given in his memorandum to the C.I.G.S., he considered it necessary to take certain precautions immediately on the front of his Second Army and to make preparations for a rapid transfer of more considerable forces from the Fifth Army to the north, should the situation require it.

It was obvious, he said, that for the Fifth Army to go on preparing for an attack, when it was only faced with rearguards working on a carefully prepared scheme of retirement, was merely to play the enemy's game and to use up forces which might soon be urgently required elsewhere.

An immediate alteration of plans as far as the Fifth Army was concerned was evidently necessary, though local operations to secure observation might be required.

As far as the attack by the Third and First Armies was concerned [Vimy front], Sir Douglas said he saw no reason to make any serious alteration in the original plan; but, he pointed out, the attack by these armies would only have a local effect if it did not form part of the general scheme of the French offensive.

What was this scheme in the altered circumstances, he asked. He wondered whether under the new conditions Cambrai was a feasible objective for his armics. He also said it was doubtful, in view of many causes of delay beyond his control and of which General Nivelle was fully aware, whether the preparations on the Arras front would be completed by April 8th.

As regards transport, he noted with regret that General Nivelle could not see his way to meet his requirements. In dignified sentences he refused to be drawn into a comparison of the requirements of his own and of the French Army. 'Even if there be an appreciable difference between them, which is not borne out by such information as is open to me, comparisons at this stage of the campaign can serve no useful purpose. In such matters there have always been differences of opinion in different countries.'

In regard to the British Mission at the G.Q.G., he said that he had been instructed to submit to the War Office the names of the officers he recommended for appointment to the Mission. Before it was formed, he considered it essential that its duties and responsibilities should be defined in writing, and he asked for a statement of General Nivelle's views on these points. He also said that as far as he was concerned his relations with General des Vallières, the Head of the French Mission, had always been excellent, and that

he was far from being convinced that any advantage would be gained by duplicating the existing arrangements.

Thinking only of defending the legitimate interests of his army, genuinely and very deeply concerned lest the German withdrawal should not only spell the ruin of the general plan of attack but also be part of a scheme whose ultimate object was to attack his left and secure the Channel Ports, Sir Douglas had, quite unconsciously, trodden on all General Nivelle's most tender corns. He had asked what were the French Commander-in-Chief's plans in the altered circumstances. The last thing General Nivelle would admit was that the enemy was on the point of retiring. To do so would be to confess that he had misread the German intentions. It would also mean that Sir Douglas's questions concerning new plans would have to be answered, a new set of operations thought out and prepared, and General Nivelle had no alternative plan. Having none, he refused to admit that circumstances might necessitate his producing one. Indeed it was difficult to conceive of any alternative that did not spell the ruin and waste of all his preparations, and a delay that would mean handing over the initiative to the enemy.

The precautions which the British Commander-in-Chief said he was taking were doubly exasperating to General Nivelle. They made it plain that his appreciation of the situation was not accepted as gospel truth at G.H.Q., and they were also the manifestation of an independence of action by the British Army which he was determined to put a stop to if he could. Sir Douglas's talk of delay was also very galling. He read into this statement purposeful ill-will displayed with the object of showing him that the British, whom he now considered his subordinates, intended to make it clear that they refused to be hustled.

But where Sir Douglas most completely misread Nivelle's mind was in the matter of the future British Mission at the G.Q.G.

Convinced by General Nivelle's own statements, he was now persuaded that the obnoxious Calais proposals were but the lucubrations of the French Government, and he therefore hoped, now this was clear, that a solution of this tiresome problem could be found on a basis of common sense, as between one soldier and another, and to prove his goodwill he emphasized the value of General des Vallières's work and by implication at least showed he was willing to develop and emphasize the existing French channel of liaison.

But the last thing General Nivelle wanted was to collaborate with

Sir Douglas on a footing of equality; he did not wish to improve upon existing methods but to break with them. He wished to establish a channel through which his commands could reach the British in such a manner that they could not be evaded.

Furthermore and very unfortunately, as has been seen, General des Vallières had been antagonized owing to the way he considered he had been cold-shouldered both by the G.H.Q. Staff and by the British Commander-in-Chief. Still more unfortunately, on the day after Sir Douglas wrote to Nivelles, des Vallières sent in a report to the G.Q.G. based on a conversation he had just had with Haig.<sup>1</sup>

Every point in Sir Douglas's letter most calculated to exacerbate General Nivelles's annoyance was quite unconsciously emphasized by des Vallières, who enlarged upon the stress laid by the British Commander-in-Chief on a possible German attack in Flanders, which, Sir Douglas said, would require the immediate creation of *fresh reserves* in Belgium, sufficient to guarantee not only the British but also the Belgian line, since the Belgian Army was certain to fall back in the face of a strong onslaught. Consequently several divisions and artillery brigades which were to have taken part in the attack on the Arras front were to remain in the north, and important reserves taken from the Fifth Army were to be in readiness to be transported thither at the first signal.

This last point, not mentioned in the British Commander-in-Chief's letter, and which if true would have profoundly affected the British attack at Vimy and consequently the whole balance of his plan, comprehensibly angered and upset General Nivelles. What followed did not placate him. The British Field Marshal, wrote des Vallières, intended to appeal to his Government under the saving clause of the Calais Agreement. This was true, and the Head of the French Mission was right to report it if he had been told so, but what was quite wrong, and an unjustified and quite untrue interpretation put by himself on what he had been told, was his statement that not only would the British offensive be diminished by the fact that the Fifth Army would not take part in the attack, but that the First and Third Armies [on the Vimy and Arras fronts] would not attack *à fond*.

Des Vallières was more justified in stating his own conviction that the British wished to reserve themselves for the attack in Belgium.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XV (page 560).



The supposed British tendency to cause delay was also emphasized on the ground that both the Commander-in-Chief and General Kiggell, the C.G.S., had expressed doubts as to whether their preparations would be completed in time. Sir Douglas had also spoken to General des Vallières very much in the sense of his letter to General Nivelle concerning the liaison between the two General Headquarters. He told the French General he was perfectly satisfied with his work. Upon which statement des Vallières dryly remarked that 'since the month of October 1916 the Field Marshal has constantly avoided (in the most diplomatic and courteous way) ever having any important discussion with me concerning the operations of his armies.'

This was true enough, and it was a thousand pities that des Vallières, a loyal and gallant soldier, should have been kept at arm's length. Had he been treated as a real friend he would have responded.

Des Vallières concluded his report by saying that Sir Douglas was determined to oppose the new French conception of the British Mission at the Grand Quartier Général.

Des Vallières's report not unnaturally irritated Nivelle, who read into it, and he could hardly have done otherwise, a plain determination on the part of Haig to use the German withdrawal as a pretext to sabotage not only his authority but even his plan.

As far as the reiterated fears concerning our attack in the north were concerned, most of the Third Bureau at the Grand Quartier Général, believing such a thing to be impossible, were inclined to treat British fears as a manifestation of positive bad faith. Nivelle certainly did not accept them as genuine. This was the stranger as the French War Office was much exercised on the subject, having received positive news concerning large enemy concentrations in the north on the 5th.

General Nivelle's reply to Haig, dated March 6th, enclosing a copy of a *directive* such as he considered the Calais Agreement entitled him to send, expressed his resentment and irritation by a reassertion of his authority.<sup>1</sup> He wrote that in his view the Germans were no more likely to attack in Flanders than in Champagne, in Alsace or in Lorraine. They had no more reserves in the former area than in the latter.

I consider in consequence that a particular anxiety on this

<sup>1</sup> Appendices XVI and XVII (pages 563 and 565).

account is not specially justified, and that you ought to devote all your available forces, without regard to any other consideration, to your participation in the combined offensive. If you consider it necessary, pending the opening of our offensive, to take certain special precautionary measures in this region, *I only consent on the express condition that these dispositions will in no way interfere with the preparations for your Arras attack, and that the strength of this attack will not be reduced by a single man or gun.*

As regards the railways and the transport of material, it is inadmissible that the labour and transport which are required for your zone of attack should not have absolute priority over that for the Ypres region, where their immediate utility is necessarily hypothetical. *I have explained to you at length in the attached directive the method of employment of the troops at your disposal which I consider to be the best, and I have defined the object of your attack at Arras as well as the date on which this attack should be ready.*<sup>1</sup>

General Nivelle then dealt with the constitution of the British Mission at his Headquarters.

He did not wish to throw any discredit on the very distinguished officers composing it; on the contrary he would be glad if they could be retained at their posts. He reiterated his request that General Clive should be charged with the question of Operations. Referring to the Head of the Mission he wrote:

The British General Officer who will be placed at the head of this Mission must have the necessary authority and experience to fill his rôle. That is why I have asked you to have General Wilson nominated to this post . . . I must be allowed to insist once more on his appointment.

He concluded by stating that as Sir Douglas's memorandum to the War Cabinet was not addressed to him he did not feel bound to reply to it, but that as it was intended to be communicated to the British War Cabinet he had felt obliged to communicate it also to his own Government.

The *directive* dwelt once more on the unlikelihood of the German withdrawal affecting the main offensive.

The Hindenberg Line is so situated [he wrote] that our principal attacks both in the French and in the British zones could outflank and take it in rear. On this account the German withdrawal will, even if it becomes general, be to our

<sup>1</sup> My italics throughout.

advantage, and on this fact I base a first decision, which is not to make any fundamental alteration in the general plan of operations that has been drawn up.

Dealing with the situation on the British Fifth Army front, and recognizing that here no serious attack was possible in face of the destruction carried out by the enemy, he requested Sir Douglas to withdraw six out of its twelve infantry divisions. Some of these troops were, he indicated, to be sent together with some heavy batteries to the Fourth Army, and Sir Douglas was to instruct General Rawlinson to use them on his right flank 'with the object of co-operating effectively with the attack of the Groupe des Armées du Nord.'

As regards the remainder of these troops, they should be placed in reserve in rear of your front at Arras.

General Nivelle went on.

You will either employ these divisions (and the available heavy artillery) wholly or in part to reinforce your attack at Arras . . . or these will constitute a general reserve.

He concluded by saying:

I have no intention at the present moment of modifying the orders given to the Groupe des Armées du Nord, on whose front there is no material indication that the enemy has decided to retire.

These documents, for all their assertion of authority, concealed a real sense of disquietude, just as the precise sentences masked exasperation. Des Vallières's report had brought matters to a head. General Nivelle realized that if he did not act he would find himself with no more power than before the Calais Conference, and he made up his mind to appeal to higher authority and to mobilize all the political forces he could influence to keep himself on the pedestal upon which he had set himself, but which was so unfortunately already revealing the most disconcerting and uncomfortable lack of stability.

Meanwhile in Paris a complicated situation was rapidly developing into a crisis, postponed only by the skill in political acrobatics of the Prime Minister, Monsieur Briand, who was also exceedingly busy intriguing against some of his own colleagues. These, distrustful of each other, were ready to abandon the sinking, some said stinking, ship; for Monsieur Briand's inexplicable complacency

towards the Germanophil King of Greece caused not only irritation but also what was certainly unjustified suspicion.

Many politicians, and especially Georges Leygues, were persistent in their attacks. This Deputy had declared in secret sessions of the Chamber that there were as many policies as there were Allied Missions in Greece. He added: 'There are the same watertight compartments, the same hostility between them as between the Allies themselves. At Athens there are four Allied Ministers and four policies! That of Italy, violent and irrevocably opposed to the Liberals and to Venizelos; that of France, favourable to the Liberals and to Venizelos; that of Great Britain, selfish and secretive; that of Russia, fantastic and incoherent.'

Thus the Chamber vituperated, while in the lobbies and *salons* of Paris ran the most extraordinary rumours, the mildest of which insinuated that the Prime Minister's indulgence towards Greece could only be accounted for by his friendship for Prince George of Greece and more especially for Princess George.

These tales, of which Briand was naturally well aware, exasperated him to such an extent that one day, in Cabinet, looking hard at some of his colleagues whom he knew to be amongst the busiest of the tale-bearers, he said, 'Since there are some who would pick up their keys of office out of the mud in which they say I am wallowing, I invite them to have a roll in it with me.'

Those Ministers who were not engrossed in political intrigue, such as the straightforward and selfless Admiral Lacaze, the Minister of Marine, were deeply preoccupied by the pacifist tendencies which was obtruding themselves more and more obviously in different parts of the country.

As for General Lyautey, he was far from happy. He was completely innocent of participating in any plot against the Prime Minister, but his relations with Monsieur Briand were not cordial. Moreover, he had his difficulties with his own department which kept his hands full.

Under Joffre, the Staff at the Ministry of War had dwindled into insignificance and was now incapable of filling its rôle as General Lyautey understood it. This did not suit the soldier-Minister, who found himself doubling the rôles of politician and technician. He felt keenly the anomaly of his position. Was he to pretend to be a civilian, incapable of discussing technical questions? If they had not wanted a soldier, why had they sent for him from Morocco? He

longed to return there, and felt he soon would; but so long as he was in Paris he made it clear that he intended to carry out his duties as he conceived them.

In his relations with Nivelle, General Lyautey would not, perhaps because of his training and temperament could not, avoid dealing with him as one general with another, and in this he was in the wrong. There were bound to be clashes. Lyautey was Nivelle's superior in rank, but the post he held in the military hierarchy was submerged in his ministerial functions. Nivelle rightly claimed supremacy in his own sphere and was not slow to resent Lyautey's incursions into his preserves. The Commander-in-Chief had a caustic tongue and was certainly not discreet, so it may well be that some of his descriptions of the Minister cavorting about the front followed by a numerous suite may have reached the latter's ears. He was certainly aware that Nivelle had begged those Ministers with whom he came in contact to discourage Lyautey's tendency to act the part of a quick-change artist and to combine the rôles of General and Resident-General in Morocco with that of Minister for War.

The trouble was that the respective functions of Minister and Commander-in-Chief were unco-ordinated. Parliament, when it had obtained the dismissal of Joffre, had been careful to limit the powers of his successor to the theatre in which he actually exercised command. Nivelle could not therefore treat with foreign military authorities except his immediate neighbours, without breaking away from the limits imposed upon him. He could not deal with the British War Office, nor with the Italians, nor even with Sarraïl in Salonika, as Joffre had been wont to do. On the other hand the Ministry of War was not equipped to do so.

What the French lacked at this juncture was an officer occupying a post similar to that of our Chief of the Imperial General Staff, who interpreted the military situation to a civilian Cabinet, advised it on military matters, and transmitted to the Commander-in-Chief the ministerial decisions. The need for this post had not been felt by the French in the early part of the war. In the days when Monsieur Millerand had been Minister for War he had made himself into an impervious protective wall between the civilian authority and the Commander-in-Chief. Like a breakwater he had stood, his self-imposed task to protect the Military Command, and against his dour and stubborn authority the waves of political intrigue had broken. Trouble started as soon as he had gone, and had only

been accentuated by the appointment of a succession of soldiers to the post of Minister for War, which raised the very sensitive hackles of the military hierarchy.

In spite of his sarcasm and the witticisms of his entourage, General Nivelle sensed that departmental difficulties and questions of prerogative were not General Lyautey's only problems, and that he was becoming increasingly critical. The fact was that the more the Minister considered General Nivelle's plans for the offensive, the graver grew his doubts, and these increased as he heard from many quarters indirect criticism of Nivelle's inactivity in the face of the German retirement. His apprehensions grew also as reports reached him that the enemy were taking advantage of every day that passed to develop their defences on certain fronts. General Mazel, commanding the French Fifth Army, told him of his intense anxiety at seeing the way in which the Germans were strengthening their positions between Craonne and Reims. In Mazel's opinion these preparations would make it impossible for the French to break through in depth, which was equivalent to declaring Nivelle's plan unrealizable.

There were also fresh signs of disagreement between Nivelle and Pétain; the latter was tending to limit the scope of his attack and was being sharply taken to task by the Commander-in-Chief.

Lyautey's growing lack of faith in General Nivelle, which he hinted to Monsieur Briand more than once, was not well received. The situation was complicated enough as it was; one Commander-in-Chief had just been shelved after goodness knows what difficulties. What would Parliament, what would the country say if there were a fresh crisis in the military command? This was small comfort for General Lyautey, whose doubts were further accentuated by the increasing signs of strain he perceived between the French and British Headquarters.

Unlike General Nivelle, who had realized that after Calais there must be a struggle of wills, and that he and Haig were engaged in the starkest of encounters, Lyautey had returned to Paris satisfied that a working arrangement had been arrived at. He imagined that the British soldiers had obtained sufficient satisfaction to enable them to feel justified in co-operating fully.

Now he heard things were going from bad to worse between the two Commanders. How Nivelle could have allowed so bitter a quarrel to develop was beyond his comprehension. He himself had the highest regard for both Sir Douglas Haig and General Robertson

and got on perfectly well with the British, so his tendency was to blame Nivelle. As he rightly considered good relations between the two armies were essential to the successful prosecution of the war, he set his face against antagonizing the British soldiers and creating a breach that perhaps could not be healed. So serious did he consider the accumulating causes of dissatisfaction against General Nivelle that he thought seriously of giving the French armies another leader in spite of the Prime Minister's opposition; but there was never any chance of his doing so while Monsieur Briand remained in office. Not only was Nivelle Briand's man, but that shrewdest of lobbyists, that acutest of psychologists and subtlest of negotiators, felt that by backing Haig's opponent he was bidding for the British Prime Minister's support and sympathy, which he was anxious to preserve as his own prerogative, and which was important to the existence of his tottering Cabinet.

On March 7th there landed like a stone, plop, in the very middle of these turgid and troubled political waters, Nivelle's report enclosing Haig's letter to himself and memorandum to the British War Cabinet. These documents achieved a result Sir Douglas could hardly have foreseen, one which Briand had almost given up as hopeless, for they instantly united his Cabinet, a band of weary, disillusioned and distrustful men, by enabling them to vent their sorely tried nerves on the most ideal of scapegoats, an absentee who was furthermore a foreigner. Monsieur Briand, a first-class huntsman who well knew the proclivities of his pack, instantly gave a vicw halloo and urged his hounds on after Haig.

Even General Lyautey was upset. He believed, as did many other competent soldiers, in the wisdom of a single command, and considered that only by giving control to the French Commander-in-Chief could the idea be carried out. The Calais Agreement had, he thought, met the case. Failing to take into account the question of national pride involved, aware of the dispute between the French and British generals but not having fathomed its depth or bitterness, he resented what he considered Sir Douglas's attempt to upset an agreement he had himself signed. He declared nevertheless that he did not hold General Nivelle blameless, for he believed that with a little tact on his part matters need never have reached such a pass.

This was not the opinion of his colleagues in the Cabinet. They supported Monsieur Briand, who was furious. Their attitude is

comprehensible. They had been led to understand that the British Government itself desired that the British Commander-in-Chief should be relegated to the rank of the Commander of a Group of Armies within the French military machine. They could not be expected to see objections, dangers, and disadvantages where British Ministers saw none, and they naturally took strong exception to a soldier's thwarting a decision arrived at by the two Cabinets.

Monsieur Briand perceived quite clearly that the British Army was on the point of escaping French control, and he determined to make a bold bid to retrieve the position. He decided to make a frontal attack on Haig. Hitherto he had been at pains to avoid doing so; as wily as his British opposite number, he had been careful not to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for him. It was too dangerous a game, one at which you were apt to burn your fingers. Events however now compelled action, and the French Prime Minister together with his Cabinet felt that in view of what had occurred both at Calais and before that meeting they could rely on the support of the British War Cabinet if they took a strong line.

According to Marshal Joffre, the French Ministers were very certain of their ground in London. In a memorandum he caused to be drawn up on March 20th, and which has since been published by his then Chief of Staff, Colonel Fabry, he makes the statement that the French War Committee determined to obtain the dismissal of Haig, adding: 'Mr. Lloyd George had informed the French War Committee that he did not wish to assume the responsibility for this operation (owing to political difficulties), but that he would be pleased to have his hand forced, and had very clearly offered to support and bring to a successful issue any direct request by the French War Committee.'

The resolve to attack Haig was flatly opposed by Lyautey, who declared that it would be acting disloyally towards a soldier who had received him with such frankness a few days before. But he was overruled, and a telegram which was in fact an indictment of the British Commander-in-Chief was drawn up.

It is certain that the French War Committee would not have dared send it had they not believed they were voicing Mr. Lloyd George's own views, for there can be few examples of so peremptory a message being dispatched by one friendly Government to another. It was dated the same day as they received General Nivelle's communication, March 7th.



After summarizing the correspondence that had taken place up to date, the note addressed by Haig to the War Cabinet was commented upon as follows:<sup>1</sup>

From this note appears:

1. A determination not to accept the decisions of the Calais Conference.

2. A tendency continually repeated to reconsider the plan of operations accepted by the Conference which was attended by the heads of the British and French Governments, provided with full powers by the two Governments and by their War Cabinets, a tendency all the more dangerous since the period of the offensives is at hand.

3. A tendency calculated to surrender the initiative in the operations, shown by praise of everything the Germans can do or plan without taking into account for one instant that we could benefit by the same advantages. For example, the first line of paragraph (a), the first line of paragraph (b), all paragraph (d), lastly all paragraph (f), which in the last line contemplates the reduction of British co-operation and even the abandonment of the plan.

The lack of foundation for Sir Douglas's assumption that the Germans were likely to attack in the north was dealt with, and the telegram then went on:

There is only one real fact, which was already known at the time of the Calais decisions, and that is the retreat on the Ancre.

General Nivelle has in consequence decided:

That no change need be made in the general plan of operations unless there are new developments.

Thus the French Ministers, echoing in almost identical words Nivelle's letter to Haig of March 6th, irretrievably committed the French Commander-in-Chief to a policy strongly reminiscent of the strategic conceptions of the ostrich.

The next paragraph contained the ominous words:

The secondary attack on the Ancre, whose object has been partly attained, should be abandoned, thus making available a reserve of some six divisions, *which will be left for the present at Marshal Haig's disposal.*<sup>2</sup>

Then followed a direct indictment of Haig:

Marshal Haig's repeated tendency to avoid the instructions

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XVIII (page 568).

<sup>2</sup> The italics are mine.

which have been given to him, to reopen continually the question of the offensive itself and the plan of operations, and this at a time when these are on the point of being carried out . . . would make the exercise of a unified command impossible.

The French War Committee went on to demand that the Field Marshal

be ordered to conform, without delay, to the decisions of the Calais Conference and to the instructions given him by General Nivelle.

Then, turning its attention to the question of the British Mission at the G.Q.G., it continued:

The French War Committee insists that General Wilson . . . be appointed . . .

The concluding words of this uncompromising document were as follows:

In case the War Cabinet should not see the possibility of thus remedying without delay the grave difficulties noted above, it will not be possible for the French Commander-in-Chief to ensure the unity of the operations on the Western Front, and the French Government would only be able to express its great regret at this situation.

Were there any doubt as to who had inspired this dispatch, Marshal Joffre's testimony would dispel it:

General Nivelle, believing that Marshal Haig should be replaced, took the initiative of a telegram from the French to the British War Cabinet, which was a veritable *acte d'accusation*.

If Sir Douglas Haig had succeeded in galvanizing the French War Committee, they in turn certainly gave a shock to their opposite numbers in London.

All save Mr. Lloyd George resented the tone of Monsieur Briand's dispatch.<sup>1</sup> He suspected Sir Douglas of trying to sabotage the Calais Agreement, and considered that by his attitude he had provoked this outburst from the French. But there was no mistaking the feelings of the other Ministers, whose gorges rose as they realized the humiliation to which Haig was being subjected.

<sup>1</sup> See William Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, p. 222.

They were shocked too at a possible interpretation of the Calais Convention which had not struck them before. The French Commander-in-Chief was the servant of the French War Committee. If he were to have absolute command over the British armies, would not this mean that those armies would in reality be under the orders of the French, not of the British, Government? The assertion, made in the name of the War Committee in Monsieur Briand's telegram, of General Nivelle's right to control the British reserves, seemed to imply that such a claim might well be made.

The French Government was left in no doubt as to the opinion of the majority of the British Cabinet. Very highly placed personages made a point of letting their views be known, none the less effectively because privately. It was made clear that Nivelle's rough and peremptory tone to the British Commander-in-Chief was resented. While there was no desire to reverse the decision to place General Nivelle in control of the forthcoming operations, Ministers pointed out that not only would co-operation be made more difficult, but the repetition of the experiment might, if the present state of affairs continued, become impossible.

Mr. Balfour, the Foreign Secretary, both saw and wrote to the French Ambassador, Monsieur Cambon, stating quite frankly that he considered the tone of Nivelle's communications to Sir Douglas Haig dictatorial. He pointed out, speaking generally, that the two Commanders-in-Chief must be considered as equals, even if for special reasons the British Government had thought it expedient, in the interests of the Alliance, to place the British under the French General for one particular operation. He reminded the Ambassador that the French Government should bear in mind that the procedure involved meant a considerable sacrifice of national sentiment, however necessary this might be from a military point of view, and was not likely to commend itself to those responsible for organizing and commanding what was incomparably the largest British Army that had ever taken the field.

The difficulties inherent in the arrangement would, Mr. Balfour wrote, be enormously increased if General Nivelle adopted towards Sir Douglas Haig a tone which would be quite proper if he were dealing with one of his own divisional commanders. Mr. Balfour also pointed out that friendly and frank consultation and discussion were far more likely to produce satisfactory results than bare orders, and he added the grave warning that he said this not merely in the

interests of the immediate operations but in those of the permanent co-operation of the two Allied armies.

With a keen perception of the future, he asked the Ambassador to consider that at a later stage in the campaign the proposal of again placing both armies under a single command might well seem desirable from a military point of view, but, he wrote, if owing to lack of tact or consideration either on the part of the French or the British the present experiment failed, it might prove impossible to repeat it, which might give the Germans an unlooked-for advantage since they possessed not only interior lines but an undivided command. Mr. Balfour concluded by saying that he was only speaking for himself.

Inevitably the reaction of his colleagues to the French dispatch weakened the position Mr. Lloyd George had taken up at Calais. Not that he would have feared to face them all had they sided against him; he had often proved a match for them, and he certainly did not lack courage. Mistaken though he may have been, and open though his methods certainly were to criticism, his courage was never in doubt, for it was fed by the pure flame of a patriotism that acted as a beacon to the whole nation.

But his first enthusiasm for General Nivelle had cooled, and some doubts had begun to assail him concerning the latter's rigidity in the matter of the German retreat. His experience of soldiers made him put them down as generally men of one-track minds, and all save General Wilson seemed to him devoid of imagination. The French Commander-in-Chief's refusal even to consider what was after all a probable contingency was disconcerting.

So he who had so often pressed General Robertson to recommend the dismissal of Haig, and who had tried to manoeuvre the Field Marshal into a position which made his resignation inevitable, did not attempt to use the French dispatch to press for this now. It was not that he thought more of Haig; he thought less of Nivelle, that was all.

It would not have increased his opinion of the Frenchman had he known that Nivelle, whom he had liked and admired so much, had made even the President of the Republic, who amongst his many qualities did not count the saving grace of humour, laugh when he told him in all seriousness that Mr. Lloyd George's object was, once he had got rid of Haig, to take command of the Franco-British forces himself.

All this time General Robertson, like a barrel in a torrent, had suffered many bumps but was still afloat. He had insisted upon making a statement to the War Cabinet, for he was anxious to explain both exactly what had taken place at Calais and why he had signed the Agreement. He was also determined that Ministers should be made to realize some at least of its graver implications.

This statement was nothing more than a verbatim account of what had actually taken place. He added that no agreement was needed to ensure Sir Douglas Haig's full co-operation with General Nivelle; it would have been granted in the fullest measure in any event, but, he said, let the War Cabinet beware! There was a world of difference between co-operation and the French proposals. The choice lay between partnership, as it had hitherto been practised, and placing the British armies permanently under General Nivelle's command. The Convention, in his opinion, embodied a dangerous principle, since it might prove to be the thin end of the wedge enabling the French to carry out their long-cherished ambition of controlling the British armies in France. He asked the War Cabinet to remember that the principle once conceded would be difficult to depart from, since if the arrangements made were best for one major operation they must be good for others.

He asked Ministers to consider that our officers and men could not be expected to fight as well under a foreign Commander as under their own, and that the Dominion Governments might object. There appeared, he said, to be considerable risk in entrusting the conduct of the great offensive upon which we were about to embark to a foreign officer, as yet untried in high command; this was, he pointed out, a serious responsibility to undertake *vis-à-vis* the Empire. Quite determined not to spare Ministers or to allow them to escape from any of the implications of the Calais Conference, Sir William also expressed the view that it was illegal to place British troops under anyone not holding His Majesty's Commission, and then declared that he hoped he had made it clear that he did not, and in fact could not, agree to placing the British armies under General Nivelle, and that his signature to the Agreement merely meant that he had accepted it as being the method best suited to give effect to a decision to which he was not a party.

He also dealt with the personal aspect of the situation as far as Sir Douglas and he were concerned. Why, it might be asked, had they both signed the Convention if they objected to it so strongly? Why

had they not declined to have anything to do with it if they disagreed with the Cabinet decision? His answer was that complete objection had been made; to go on repeating this would have been mere obstinacy. The soldiers, he said, had had no choice but to obey the Cabinet decision or break up the conference by refusing to accept it. This, they had gathered, might embarrass the Government, and neither he nor Sir Douglas was prepared to do this at a critical stage of the war. But, said Sir William in his usual downright way, their signature did not mean they agreed with the Cabinet decision. 'We did not do so nor do we now.'

His last shot was the deadliest. Once the battle was engaged, he declared, the success and safety of the British armies would not rest with Sir Douglas Haig but with General Nivelle. As Sir Douglas was to conform to General Nivelle's orders in all matters relating to the conduct of operations, subject only to the reservation concerning tactics, it was the French and not the British Commander-in-Chief who would be responsible, not only for the movements of troops but also for the medical, transport and supply services. Nothing could be clearer: the War Cabinet had assumed the inescapable responsibility of placing the fate of our armies, and therefore of the Empire, in the hands of a foreign general who, furthermore, was not responsible to them but to his own Government.<sup>1</sup> So much for Sir William's official remonstrances to the War Cabinet as a body, but he had other means of action. Privately he used every endeavour to make its individual members realize the seriousness of the position, relentlessly he forced reluctant ministerial noses down to the consideration of his last and most crucial point: on whose shoulders did the Calais Convention place responsibility for the British Army?

It was quite true, he admitted, that under paragraph three of the convention Sir Douglas could refuse to compromise the safety of the army and appeal to his own Government; but supposing a situation arose whereby the Channel Ports and Paris were threatened, was there any doubt which General Nivelle would consider the more important? Which would he prefer, the capital of his country or the lines of communication of our army with England? What control had the British

<sup>1</sup> Robertson was right. In 1918 when Foch was appointed Generalissimo, the same right of appeal by the British Commander-in-Chief to his own Government was maintained in the convention drawn up at Doullens. Upon several occasions Mr. Lloyd George asked Sir Douglas Haig to appeal under this clause. This was the only way in which Sir Douglas could resume full responsibility, and so relieve the Government of its

Government over Nivelle? None, absolutely none. The rugged old man stumped up and down Ministers' rooms, or glowering at them from under his enormous eyebrows banged the table and repeated again and again that Nivelle was answerable to the French Government alone, and that therefore the French and not the British Government was the supreme authority over our army. Was that what was wanted? he growled, baring his teeth in the alarming way he had: well, if so, tell the country.

It was all very unpleasant to listen to. This old soldier would then, barrel-like, roll out and stopping at the door turn to declare that all one could do was to pray no emergency would arise which would put to the test the wisdom of handing our armed forces over to Monsieur Briand and his political friends. Which would receive a square deal at their hands, the French or the British armies? The door would bang and he was gone. His technique was, it seems, always the same, rough and rude, but he succeeded in making most members of the War Cabinet reflect none too happily on the position in which the Calais Agreement had placed them.

It was not long before Sir William's arguments were emphasized and their justification proved from an unexpected quarter, namely General Nivelle himself. In a letter he sent to the French Minister of War, dated the 10th, he wrote:

With regard to the concern of the Field Marshal as to his responsibilities towards the British Government, it should be pointed out to him that, in view of the attitude of the enemy on his front, and the close proximity of the date of our offensive, the so-called period of operations should be deemed to have begun, *and that since the British Government has placed him under my orders, he is, by this fact, relieved of responsibility.*<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile Robertson had somewhat modified his tactics. His main endeavour now was to prevent at all costs further direct interference by the War Cabinet. Enough harm, he thought, had already been done. Let the soldiers themselves find a way of working the convention. To Ministers he said that if Nivelle would only show himself reasonable and understanding, Sir Douglas would, he was certain, respond. There was, he argued, no insuperable difference of opinion between the two Commanders-in-Chief concerning the military situation. Haig was apprehensive concerning his left flank; Nivelle argued that every point in the line was liable to

<sup>1</sup> The italics are mine

attack, which was certainly true. Well, let them meet and discuss the matter personally, that was the only solution. To Haig he said much the same, and made it clear that he deemed it wise to accept General Wilson as Head of the Mission at the G.Q.G. since this would please the Cabinet. But it was impossible for the C.I.G.S. to create a calm atmosphere.

The French Government's communication was received in London on the 7th and considered by the War Committee the same day. This was viewed with grave concern, and it was decided that there should be further consultation between the leaders of the two countries, the generals to hold a preliminary discussion on one day, to be followed on the next by a meeting of Ministers.

To make matters worse, Sir Douglas, who received next day (the 8th) Nivelle's letter and instructions of the 6th, telegraphed to Robertson that they contained orders going beyond the scope of the Calais Agreement.

On the 9th he answered General Nivelle, sending him a letter and 'Remarks on the French Commander-in-Chief's *directive*.'<sup>1</sup>

The language was moderate but the tone extremely firm. Sir Douglas evidently now saw clearly the path he meant to follow. In the letter he dealt with the question of the German reserves which the withdrawal towards the Hindenburg Line had already increased and might increase still further.

The security of the line between Lille and the sea had always been of 'vital and immediate consequence especially to the British armies'.

He had never, he said, reduced the strength of the Second Army without calculating most carefully the risk incurred, and that risk naturally depended on the reserves at the enemy's disposal.

Sir Douglas also pointed out that before the German withdrawal the salient between the Ancre and the Scarpe had been equally vulnerable on the fronts of the Fifth and Third Armies, but the enemy's vulnerability in this area was now reduced to a sector just south of the Scarpe which they were busy strengthening, as well as Vimy.<sup>2</sup>

This meant, said Sir Douglas, that he had to reckon with meeting even greater resistance than had been anticipated, especially as General Gough's Fifth Army would, under the changed conditions, be able to afford but little assistance to the Third Army.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XIX (page 570).

<sup>2</sup> See Map facing p. 560.



He went on to say that the altered situation enabled him to withdraw troops from the Fifth Army with which he could maintain the strength of the Second Army until the enemy's intentions were clearer. He said he hoped to be able eventually to strengthen the attack on both banks of the Scarpe, and he had no intention of either weakening or delaying these attacks unless circumstances should render this unavoidable.

The letter ended by asking General Nivelle to send him his views concerning the scope of the responsibilities and duties of the proposed Mission at the G.Q.G., so that once these had been settled he could select suitable officers.

Sir Douglas's remarks on the *directive* made his point of view clear in blunter terms. Tactically, he said, his attack on the Scarpe was now far more difficult than had been originally thought, since after the capture of the first lines little organized resistance had been anticipated. Now the plan, subsequent to the capture of the first lines, would have to be almost entirely recast.

He stated plainly that as yet he was unable to estimate exactly the number of divisions, heavy batteries, etc., which he might be able to withdraw from the Fifth Army.

The proposed reinforcement of General Rawlinson was, he said, quite outside the original plan. There was no prospect of his being able to reinforce the General, unless he found it possible later to withdraw transport and guns from the Second Army, and probably not even then.

Proceeding with the general snubbing he was deliberately administering to General Nivelle, he went on to say 'My general reserve will of course be organized in accordance with the tasks for which I may require it'.

His conclusion was infinitely proud and dignified. 'My utmost endeavours will,' he wrote, 'be exerted to make the attacks I have undertaken to launch as strong as possible, and to deliver them on the date named, subject always to such action by the enemy as may compel me to take special steps to ensure the safety of my armies. From this responsibility to my King and Country and to the officers and men placed under me, I feel that nothing can release me so long as I am entrusted with the command of His Majesty's Armies in France and Flanders.'

It is a curious commentary on General Nivelle's injunctions to Sir Douglas to reinforce Rawlinson's Army that General Franchet

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d'Esperey, who was chiefly concerned, expected no such step to be taken. On the 3rd, at a conference held at Fourth Army Headquarters at which I was present, a convention was drawn up in which it was laid down that no British infantry belonging to this army would co-operate in the attack of the G.A.N. Only artillery support was discussed and the number of guns to be employed was laid down.

General Nivelle annotated Sir Douglas Haig's two communications in person, and these pencil notes establish more clearly than anything else could have done the differences between the two Commanders.

Against Sir Douglas's statement that the German withdrawal had considerably modified the tactical situation in the sector where it had taken place, he wrote 'exaggerated'.

In the margin of the paragraph in which Sir Douglas stated that he would carry out his attacks on the Scarpe without delaying them unless compelled to take special measures to ensure the safety of his armies, General Nivelle wrote, 'insist on the fact that, once engaged, it is necessary to develop the full strength of the attack without taking into account any other considerations, with which it will be the duty of the [French] Commander-in-Chief to deal'. And against the sad and proud paragraph in which Sir Douglas refused to abdicate his duty to his King, his Country and his men, the French General scribbled 'that responsibility is mine since the British Government has so decided'.<sup>1</sup>

It was all quite clear. If the left flank of the British Army was threatened, if its communications with England were endangered, this was a matter to be dealt with by General Nivelle. The British Commander-in-Chief had nothing to do with the matter. Nor was he held to be, as we all implicitly believed he was, responsible to his King and Country for the safety of England, the Empire and all of us in France. This rôle had now devolved on a foreigner. Such was the logical interpretation placed upon the Calais Conference by the French, such was the result of Mr. Lloyd George's intervention.

The points of view of the two Commanders were quite irreconcilable, and few Englishmen will fail to agree with Sir Douglas. General Nivelle's thesis was no doubt logical, and the position conceded to him at Calais may have entitled him to take up the attitude he did, but we all owe a deep debt of gratitude to Sir Douglas Haig for

<sup>1</sup> 'Cette responsabilité passe sur ma tête puisque le gouvernement britannique s'en charge.'

having uncompromisingly defended principles which could not have been abandoned without killing the soul of our army, breaking the spirit and the highest hopes of our people and sullyng our national honour.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE LONDON CONFERENCE

THE receipt of Monsieur Briand's telegram in London had at least the advantage of clearing the ground. The whole of the British War Cabinet now knew exactly where the French War Committee and General Nivelle stood.

Mr. Lloyd George saw this clearly enough. He insisted, quite rightly, on another inter-Governmental conference being held, but if his attitude had changed considerably in the few days that had elapsed since Calais, this was due rather to circumstances than to any retraction on his part.

The new conference, in his own words, was to 'assume the final responsibility for a decision which will govern the combined strategy of the combined armies'.

But the French were opposed to the suggested meeting. Everything had been settled at Calais. The French Government relied upon Mr. Lloyd George to 'impose on Field Marshal Haig the respect of the decision taken at Calais'.

Monsieur Briand personally was reluctant to go to London. For one thing he was too busy. He dared not relax his watch over the Chamber for a moment.

General Nivelle considered a meeting to be 'both unnecessary and inopportune'. In the circumstances it is comprehensible that he would have preferred to avoid meeting the British soldiers face to face. He had nothing to gain from discussion; the time for that was past. All he wanted was that 'the decision already arrived at should be carried out', and he again begged his Government to bring whatever pressure was necessary to compel the British Cabinet to impose compliance with his orders upon Sir Douglas Haig.

On the 7th, called by the War Committee to Paris, he pressed his point of view, and a few days later his Liaison Officer to the Government, Colonel Herbillon, saw the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic. Herbillon, by the Commander-in-Chief's orders, insisted that the situation at the front could only be adequately dealt with if the British worked in absolute liaison with the French, and that this liaison could only be obtained 'if they are under our orders'. Briand's

comment was that the tone of the communications to Sir Douglas Haig might be softened as he was often *fraisé*.

It is to be noted that during this period, both at the Grand Quarter Général and in Paris, General Wilson, who, it was assumed, would go to Beauvais, was not described as the Head of the British Mission but as the *Major Général* attached to the G.Q.G. to see that the orders issued by General Nivelle were carried out. (In the French Army the *Major Général* is the Chief of Staff.)

The French protests proved unavailing. Mr. Lloyd George insisted upon the conference taking place, the War Cabinet sending three telegrams and a long letter to obtain French acceptance.

These communications caused the French Government increasing alarm, for the British War Cabinet was now reflecting Sir Douglas's views in an ever-increasing degree. The opinion was even expressed that the present plan of military operations required careful revision.

It was proposed, as General Robertson had suggested, that a military conference should precede the Governmental one, and that any agreement arrived at by the soldiers should be ratified by the two War Cabinets, which would, however, have to step in and take the necessary decisions themselves should the soldiers fail to agree.

At last Monsieur Briand consented to the conference being held, but it assembled without him, for at the last moment he delegated Monsieur Ribot to take his place. General Lyautey, Admiral Lacaze, Monsieur Albert Thomas, all Members of the War Committee, and General Nivelle, composed the delegation.

Gossip at the time said that Monsieur Briand was not sorry to be rid of some of his colleagues even for a day or two, as their absence relieved him of opposition in the Cabinet to certain measures he had at heart.

The French team that assembled in London was in every way weaker than the one that had assembled at Calais a fortnight earlier.

Its greatest handicap was that this time there was no preliminary understanding with the British politicians, no prepared scenario. Again, Monsieur Ribot, an old man if an able one, was not used to negotiating with the English. Finance was his sphere. Further, not being on particularly good or trustful terms with his Prime Minister, he was no fanatic on General Nivelle's behalf, and so was neither prepared nor equipped to plead his cause with ardour.

Nor was General Lyautey in a mood to do more than urge the desirability of the single command in which he believed. In London no more than in Paris was he prepared to work for Sir Douglas's overthrow.

General Nivelle therefore found himself somewhat isolated even amongst his own countrymen. Upon this occasion he had neither the leisure nor the inclination to repeat the social successes of his former visit. The atmosphere had changed and this time he did not make a good impression.

To the soldiers and politicians who questioned him concerning the German withdrawal that was in everybody's mind, he continued to maintain, not very convincingly some thought, the thesis that the Germans had no intention of withdrawing on a big scale. They might adjust their line as they had done on the Ancre, but nothing they could do would affect in any important degree his main plan for 1917.

D'Alenson, who accompanied him, did nothing to propitiate those he met, either in his chief's favour or his own. It was typical of him that he declared to some British officers, with the assurance of Moses laying down the law to the Israelites, that it was a pure waste of time and energy to attack the Vimy Ridge. Those who heard him gathered the impression that the French would stop the attack if they could.

Hearing that d'Alenson was going to London, and knowing he was likely to make a bad impression, far worse than I thought he deserved, for he was upright and intelligent if overbearing, I sent in a report which was intended to influence opinion in his favour. Hoping to furnish an excuse for his gruffness by giving a reason for it, I wrote:

Colonel d'Alenson is dying of phthisis and knows it. He has given up attempting to cure it. As he has eleven children this has soured him somewhat.

This was well meant though useless. Reading these words now, they seem a little sardonic, but at the time I was innocent of any such intention.

The conference met on March 12th.

The fact that the heyday of the 'Calais method' was passed was at once apparent. There was no sign from Mr. Lloyd George; and General Nivelle, who had hoped so to handle matters that Haig would be forced to accept his interpretation of the Calais Agreement,

soon realized that if he did not abandon his intransigent attitude he would lose even the authority conferred upon him by the most limited interpretation of its meaning.

It was apparent too that if the British Cabinet were still prepared, though none too warmly, to support the principle of the French Commander-in-Chief's supremacy for the duration of the offensive, they were not willing to go an inch farther.

The C.I.G.S. had made it clear, and had placed on record, that the decision to put the British Army under French command had been taken without consulting responsible military opinion. Ministers were therefore entirely responsible for the consequences; and he had further stated that the decisions reached at Calais 'caused him grave anxiety as to our final success in the war'. These statements gave rise to a marked current of opinion amongst Ministers in favour of rendering unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's, namely handing back to the soldiers what belonged to them. This would incidentally remove from their own shoulders the alarming burden of responsibility for military operations placed there by the Prime Minister and firmly clamped on and labelled by the C.I.G.S.

The French delegates were bewildered by the change. They concluded that Mr. Lloyd George's new-found desire to consult his military advisers on military matters was directly due to the fact that the result of the inquiry into the Gallipoli Expedition had just been published, and both the Press and public opinion were in an uproar at the revelations concerning the interference of the civil power in the military sphere.

The first move was a score for General Robertson. He had proposed, when the subject of the forthcoming conference was under discussion, that in the first instance the soldiers should meet independently of the politicians. He now insisted on this and had his way, being warmly supported by General Lyautey. But this decision was only reached after a preliminary meeting of the two War Cabinets at which the soldiers were present. The bad impression the Frenchmen had gathered from earlier conversations was confirmed. After a nebulous and confused discussion which tended at times to become acrimonious, the politicians adjourned, having decided nothing, and Generals Lyautey and Nivelle, together with General Robertson and Sir Douglas Haig, went over to the War Office.

In the negotiations that followed, General Lyautey, once satisfied that the British generals did not dispute General Nivelle's right to direct the forthcoming operations, placed himself on the side of General Robertson. Looking straight at the French Commander-in-Chief from under his enormous eyebrows, Wully stated bluntly that the former could not issue orders to Haig as if he were a subordinate French general, nor could it be tolerated that the Chief of the French Staff, or the Head of the British Mission at the G.Q.G., should issue orders to the British Army as if it were a French Group. He was winning all along the line. This was all the more evident when the French Minister for War declared that he quite agreed. He thought Sir Douglas had been unfairly treated, and he made it quite clear that he did not approve of the way in which Nivelle had handled the situation since Calais. His manner and his words did much to counteract, as they were meant to do, the ill-effect of Briand's telegram.

General Lyautey's goodwill contributed to clear up a great deal besides.

The British Staff had prepared a document which purported to define the relationship between the two armies. It was an agreement such as a man, having lost faith in his partner but compelled to continue in co-operation with him, might have drawn up for his own protection.<sup>1</sup>

It says a great deal for Lyautey and Robertson that they succeeded in imposing a reasonable agreement in an atmosphere such as this document revealed, but they did it. This might have been impossible had not the British soldiers, Haig, Robertson and the others, believed then and for long afterwards Nivelle's reiterated assurances that he had been *ordered* by his Government to put forward the Calais scheme.

The ground once cleared of the points raised in the British Staff memorandum, the burning question of the British Mission at the G.Q.G. was discussed.

General Nivelle, feeling his hold on Haig slipping away, developed a suggestion he had previously made. He would not correspond with the British Commander-in-Chief direct, but with the C.I.G.S. through the Head of the Mission, and General Robertson would then pass on his orders to Haig. It may be that Nivelle hoped by this means to ensure that, as General Robertson was the adviser of

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XX (page 573).



the Government, the Cabinet would be kept informed, and Mr. Lloyd George would see to it that Sir Douglas was compelled to obey the orders he received.

This proposal was at once blasted by General Robertson, who with a salvo of commonsense objections blew it sky high. He had other things to do than to transmit, water down or sugar the French General's commands. Roundly, as was his way, he told Nivelle and Haig that they must devise means of running their own affairs without appealing to him or to the Government every other day to straighten out their tangles.

General Lyautey then chimed in with a suggestion that only served to emphasize the disagreement between himself and the French Commander-in-Chief. He asked that the British Mission accredited to the French Army should in future be in Paris, attached to him. He said that he would see to it that it maintained under his supervision adequate and smooth liaison between the two General Headquarters.

General Nivelle naturally objected strongly. Lyautey's proposal would only mean constant intervention by the Minister, who would thus inevitably become the real Commander-in-Chief.

Sir William Robertson also opposed the suggestion. The Minister for War might be a civilian; how could he be responsible for the technical liaison between the two armies? Moreover, to send communications between Beauvais and Montreuil *via* Paris was obviously absurd.

The French generals held different opinions on important points, the British were perfectly clear as to what they wanted, with the result that General Robertson, on whom the main burden of the negotiations fell, carried the day through sheer honesty of purpose, directness and character. He could at times be quite eloquent and persuasive, especially when it was a question of brushing aside non-essentials and revealing the central facts. Upon such occasions he would speak for a considerable time in a deep slow voice without taking breath; he would then stop, his lungs would fill audibly and rather asthmatically, and baring his teeth he would smile a smile that always made me think of the ogre's expression when he declared with relish that he 'smelt the smell of an Englishman'; then he would start off again. This does not sound like a method that would make proselytes, and it certainly would not have galvanized multitudes, but it was extraordinarily effective because of the man's tremendous

personality and huge reserves of strength. Upon this occasion it won the day, and there was little left for the politicians to say when the memorandum drawn up by the soldiers was submitted to them.

When the two War Cabinets met on the following day, the soldiers were able to report agreement on everything except one point, the interpretation of the now famous paragraph three of the Calais Agreement. The day before, the French had wished to do away with it altogether, but they were not on very strong ground, since the proviso was exactly the same as that they had insisted upon in the case of General Gouraud at the Dardanelles.

Having failed to get the clause removed from the Agreement, they now asked that it should be laid down that Sir Douglas Haig must not suspend operations pending a decision on any point he might refer to the Cabinet.

When Mr. Lloyd George questioned Sir Douglas, he said that in point of fact he had not suspended his preparations while he referred to the War Cabinet the matters arising out of General Nivelle's letter of February 27th. He added that he fully intended to carry out General Nivelle's instructions loyally but that he must be given some latitude. 'The officer on the spot must decide whether a given order can be carried out without endangering the safety of the unit under his orders.'

It was finally decided that, while paragraph three should not be altered, it was to be stated in the *Procès Verbal* that it should be interpreted as follows -

Marshal Haig shall, as a general rule, continue his preparations according to General Nivelle's instructions while referring them to the War Cabinet. He will only interrupt them under very exceptional circumstances, that is in case he considers the security of his army or the success of his operations seriously compromised.

General Nivelle may have hoped that the Ministers would save for him some fragments of the Calais Agreement as he had tried to re-establish it, but he was doomed to disappointment. When Monsieur Ribot asked that he should be called upon to explain his plans to the assembled Ministers, an entirely new Lloyd George, now meticulously careful not to interfere in a sphere not strictly his own, declared that as the two Commanders had agreed on the text of an

agreement and were resolved to maintain unity of purpose, there was no occasion for Ministers to intervene.

The London Conference was in fact remarkable for the perfect handling of political power. Supreme and omnipotent, it was not used but kept in reserve, ready to be applied only if the soldiers failed to agree.

Monsieur Ribot's rather feeble protest on behalf of General Nivelle was disregarded, and the protocol drawn up by the soldiers was accepted.

It ran as follows:

1. The French Commander-in-Chief will only communicate with the authorities of the British Army through the intermediary of the British Commander-in-Chief. This arrangement does not apply to the relations between neighbouring Groups of Armies or Armies, nor to the carrying out of the duties of the French Mission as they are at the present time.

2. The French Commander-in-Chief will receive from the British Commander-in-Chief information as to his operation orders as well as all information respecting their execution.

The operation orders of subordinate units will be communicated to one another by neighbouring units in conformity with the usual custom, as required by the necessities of war.

3. All the British troops stationed in France remain in all circumstances under the orders of their own chiefs and of the British Commander-in-Chief. If the development of the operations should cause the French Commander-in-Chief to ask the British Commander-in-Chief to use a part of his forces for an action independent of the rest of the British Army, the British Commander-in-Chief will do his utmost to satisfy this demand. The commander of the forces thus detached may receive, as long as his independent position lasts, direct orders respecting operations from the French Higher Command.

In the second section of this document, the duties of the British Mission were defined in a reasonable way, which means they were not greatly changed.<sup>1</sup> As Abel Ferry, a member of the Army Commission of the French Chamber, wrote at the time: — 'The British Mission with a finer title and officers of a higher rank is left with approximately the same duties as before', and he added regretfully but with perfect truth — 'So far the intervention of the Govern-

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXI (page 575).

ments has only succeeded in exacerbating the ambition of General Nivelle and wounding Sir Douglas Haig'.

After a series of personal interviews with General Wilson, who had just returned from Russia, Sir Douglas withdrew his objection to his appointment, and he was duly confirmed as the British Commander-in-Chief's representative at General Nivelle's Headquarters.

So changed was Haig's position as a result of the conference that he felt strong enough to append the following note to the Agreement:

I agree with the above on the understanding that, while I am fully determined to carry out the Calais Agreement in spirit and letter, the British Army and the Commander-in-Chief will be regarded by General Nivelle as allies and not as subordinates, except during the particular operations which he explained at the Calais Conference.

Further, while I also accept the agreement respecting the functions of the British Mission at French Headquarters, it should be understood that these functions may be subject to modifications as experience shows to be necessary.

Haig had indeed scored. It was now plain that, so long as General Robertson backed him uncompromisingly as he had been doing, the Prime Minister could not, in spite of all his prestige and authority, embark upon the dangerous adventure of a further onslaught on the Commander-in-Chief.

Nivelle's ambition, too, had received a decided set-back, and his hands were soon to be far too full for him ever again to have time to retrieve the ground he had lost. Indeed presently he was only too glad to look for support from the soldier whom he had done so much to offend, and who, to his great honour, did not stint help when it was asked for.

It was left to General Robertson to write what, as far as the British were concerned, was the perfect epitaph of the period begun at Calais and ended by the London Conference.

In a letter to Nivelle, dated March 13th, he wrote:

For some time past we have been working at and drawing up conventions, but the most essential thing of all is that we should work together with cordiality and that we should have complete confidence in each other.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXII (page 578).

General Nivelle's answer, dated March 15th, was cordial enough, but it was perhaps lacking in candour.

My dear General,

I am in entire agreement with you in regard to all the points in your letter of the 13th.

Those who know me — and I think General Wilson will bear this out when he and I have worked and lived together for a time — will tell you that I err rather by excess of confidence and *camaraderie*. It will not therefore be my fault if the collaboration with Marshal Haig is not such as should exist between generals commanding in chief who are working for the same cause, especially when that cause involves nothing less than the salvation or ruin of two great nations like England and France. For if one of the two armies refused, at the moment of common action, to make the greatest possible effort, the result would be certain defeat.

If the French Army were beaten, because it had not been supported to the maximum extent by the British Army, the latter would very soon be beaten and destroyed in its turn. We shall only beat Germany if we fight together, indissolubly united, as one single army.

But that union and that common action in mutual confidence do not depend on me. And in this connection I may remind you that the Calais Conference and the last one in London were not called for by the French Government or the French Commander-in-Chief, but, in the case of the former, by the British Government, and of the latter by Marshal Haig himself, by the memorandum he sent to London.

The British Government had to send three telegrams and a long letter to get us to attend this second meeting, which was refused by both the French Government and myself.

If therefore you desire, as I do myself, to avoid in the future further manifestations of this nature, it is not to me but to your Government and to the Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in France that you should address your persuasions.

I have no need to tell you with what pleasure I shall receive you at Beauvais whenever you have occasion to come there, and notably on your way to and from Italy.

Believe me, my dear General, yours very cordially and devotedly,

R. NIVELLE.

Nivelle did not see Sir Douglas's addenda to the London Agree-

ment until he returned to Beauvais, whereupon he wrote to Haig as follows:

G.Q.G., March 15th, 1917

Monsieur le Maréchal,

I have read the postscript which you thought it necessary to add to the 'Agreement' of March 13th, 1917.

I have no observations to make, since it merely posits a state of affairs already existing. I do not think that I have ever adopted an attitude or used words towards the British Army and its Commander-in-Chief which might cause a fear that I considered them as subordinates and not as allies.

To have done so would have been to show a despicable conception of our loyal collaboration, and great ill-breeding.

And the same is true, believe me, at all times and even during the operations to which you refer.

I may add that I hope I shall not have to take part in any more such meetings as these recent ones, and that it is a great satisfaction to me that neither the French Government nor myself had any responsibility for their taking place.

The first, in point of fact, was summoned by the British Government, and it needed three telegrams and a letter in very pressing terms to get us to consent to go to London for the last one, necessitated by the memorandum you sent to London.

I shall be very happy to see you as soon as possible, whether you give me the pleasure of coming here, or give me a rendezvous elsewhere.

Believe me, Monsieur le Maréchal, yours sincerely and cordially devoted,

R. NIVELLE.

What he really thought was revealed in a note he sent to the Minister for War on the following day:

I have the honour to send you, for the War Committee,

a. A copy of the agreement between myself and Marshal Haig established after the London Conference of March 12th and 13th, 1917.

b. The English translation of this agreement, on behalf of The War Cabinet, which I have just received from General Robertson.

When the first of these documents was sent to Marshal Haig for his signature, he found it necessary to add two paragraphs to the text that had been agreed as a result of the conference on the 19th.

On account of the slight importance of these two paragraphs, and so as not to embark upon a new discussion which has no practical interest, I shall not raise officially the question of the method employed by the British Higher Command on this occasion.

The implication of contemptuous resentment piercing through the dry official sentence is curiously reminiscent of Aesop's fox and the sour grapes.

Paris was sceptical as to the results of the conference. General Nivelle's widely disseminated statements that he had obtained all he wanted were accepted with reserve; on the other hand it was assumed that General Wilson was coming to Beauvais as *Major Général*, which was taken to be a heavy score.

There is a record of a conversation between Colonel Herbillon, the Government Liaison Officer, and the President of the Republic. The former was lamenting that the British Army was not directly subordinated to the French. 'Obviously', answered the President, 'but since we have not been able to obtain it, let us work with what we have got. If Nivelle really has influence over Haig one may say we have the command.'

There were those in high authority in the French capital who gave it out that more could have been obtained from Mr. Lloyd George. They declared that the Prime Minister had expected the French to urge the question of command with more vigour, and that had he been pressed he would have given way, but that in view of the lack of vigour with which the French cause had been upheld he had not felt called upon to adopt a stronger line.

On the day the conference was assembling in London, a French officer whom I had known well earlier in the war came to see me. He now held an important civilian post in Paris and was moving in circles anything but friendly to the Briand Government. He and his friends were much concerned at the way in which both Briand and Nivelle had been handling the British.

He said that General Nivelle had little political backing apart from Briand, who was still giving him whole-hearted support. Nivelle was on bad terms with Lyautey, who for his part was enjoying anything but cordial relations with Briand and Lloyd George.

I remembered this a little later when I heard the result of the

London Conference, and it occurred to me that this lack of harmony might in some degree serve to explain the results, or lack of them, from the French point of view, which had been achieved there.

The difficulties between Briand and Ribot were increasing, my friend told me. Ribot was prepared to abandon Briand, who on his side was openly critical of Ribot; 'He is too much under the influence of the great financial houses', he used to say in private conversation, and his words of course echoed through the corridors of the Chamber.

It seemed that General Nivelle had many critics in Paris, and that his efforts to gain complete authority over the British had been closely watched. My friend said that Nivelle had been working to get Haig put under his orders for a long time. But what astonished me greatly was to hear that Nivelle had let it be known he considered it essential that the British should not take an important part in the victorious battle he was about to deliver! Amazed as I was to hear this, the reason given for this unexpected point of view took my breath away. The British, according to General Nivelle, were assuming too great military importance. It was necessary for the sake of French morale that they should be confined to a secondary rôle. As I heard this, a picture came back to me — General Nivelle sitting in his chair in his office at Beauvais, his arms thrown up, and I seemed to hear his voice as he cried: 'I am willing to give all the honour and glory to the British, all of it. All I care for is to win the war this year.' It was extraordinarily depressing.

The man from Paris had more to tell.

Neither Briand nor Lyautey was likely to remain long in power, he said. The latter had built up a system based on himself, his personality and prestige, which could not last. My informant was a true prophet.

Very soon after his return from London, during a night session of the Chamber on March 15th, General Lyautey was compelled to resign. On previous occasions he had displeased the Chamber of Deputies. His attitude seemed to be disdainful, whereas he was only shy. Politicians had been intensely annoyed by his habit of talking in his speeches of 'his' officers, a formula which a general might use but a Minister should not.

When he mounted the tribune to address the assembly on returning from London, the atmosphere was not friendly.

His first words enraged the Deputies. What he said was this.



'You will excuse my not going into technical details for, even in secret committee, I consider that in view of my responsibilities it would be to expose National Defence to dangerous risks.'

He never finished the sentence. The Chamber was in an uproar, members were shaking with rage, yelling their resentment.

What, this soldier dared to imply they were indiscreet? Dared to infer they were thoughtless chatterboxes? The mirror Lyautey held up, and in which they saw themselves as they knew themselves to be, filled them with a furious desire to smash both it and its holder.

Lyautey, it is said, shouted at the gesticulating mob three words which the official stenographers did not take down, very military words which described exactly what he thought of his audience, then he descended the steps of the rostrum and politics knew him no more, though history has reserved a shrine for him in his own sphere.

Briand was delighted to let him go.

Lyautey left office just at the moment when, thanks in no small measure to his fair-mindedness and integrity, the breach between Haig and Nivelle was almost healed. The chivalrous soldier had been sublimely unconscious of most of the intrigue, influences, political currents and personal jealousies through which he had calmly steered his straight course; but somehow his very blindness had given some guidance, and his unconsciousness helped to find a solution to one of the most dangerous crises of the war.

The enemy was one danger, but there were others more subtle but quite as deadly, discord and lack of faith. Just as a man may be struck down by disease no less than by violent death, so the virus of dissension between the Allies might have caused their collapse long before victory lay within their grasp. Had the composite soul of the two armies, made up of elements so different in essence yet so interdependent, been divided on an issue such as that raised by the Calais Conference, the spirit of resistance would have fallen from the Allies and, shorn of their moral armour, they would have been as defenceless as a crab without its shell.

On March 19th another of my friend's prophecies came true. Lyautey's resignation had not saved Monsieur Briand even for a week. His Government fell, to be replaced by a Ministry with Monsieur Ribot as Prime Minister and Painlevé as Minister for War.

The President of the Republic in the first instance asked Monsieur



(top) LYAUTEY  
(bottom) RIBOT

BRIAND  
PAINLEVÉ



Deschanel, President of the Chamber of Deputies, to form a Government. He was not anxious to do so and failed.

The new Government formed by Ribot was composed as follows :

Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs	..	Ribot
Justice	... ..	Viviani
War	... ..	Painlevé
Navy	... ..	Lacaze
Finance	... ..	Thierry
Labour	... ..	Léon Bourgeois
Supply and Transport	... ..	Violette
Munitions	... ..	Albert Thomas
Under Secretary, Munitions	... ..	Loucheur
Under Secretary, Medical Services	..	Justin Godart
Under Secretary, Air	... ..	Daniel Vincent

## CHAPTER XII

### THE GERMAN WITHDRAWAL

WHILE General Nivelle seemed wholly absorbed by his effort to dominate the British, the armies of the G.A.N., like hounds in leash, strained and bayed to be allowed to follow the hot scent wafted over from the German lines; and the enemy, who had feared above all things that the chase of the previous autumn would be resumed, paused to wonder, as many a hunted stag has done, why hounds were unaccountably lifted off the line.

None of the possible implications of the German retreat on the Ancre had escaped General d'Esperey and his Staff.

On the second day of the Calais Conference, February 27th, Colonel Desticker, the Chief of Staff, had gone in to Beauvais. General Nivelle was away at the conference, but he saw General Pont, the *Major Général*, and drew his attention to the fact that it was not only possible but likely that the Germans would extend their retreat and fall back to the Hindenburg Line on the G.A.N. front. If this were so it was obvious that the plan of attack would have to be completely rehandled. The risk of bombarding empty positions and wasting an accumulated and irreplaceable supply of shells could not be run.

Everyone at the G.A.N. knew that if the enemy were allowed to withdraw to the Hindenburg Line it would be two months at least before General d'Esperey's Armies could attack him there. Colonel Desticker pointed this out to the Staff at the G.Q.G., and also drew their attention to the fact that the Hindenburg Line lay in front of the large towns of Cambrai, St. Quentin and Laon, and that this would mean their probable destruction if the Line were attacked. He said that General d'Esperey was extremely anxious to be allowed to attack the enemy while they were in the act of retiring, that he believed they were about to do so, and asked that he should be given a free hand so that the opportunity, if it occurred, should not be missed.

In General Nivelle's absence no decision could be taken, but Colonel Desticker came back in a depressed mood, for he felt that General Nivelle's advisers, who showed considerable reluctance to

accept the views he expressed, probably reflected the mind of their Chief. To have adopted General d'Esperey's point of view would have necessitated recasting the whole plan of operations, and this Colonel Desticker gathered was the last thing Beauvais was prepared to do. They had no alternative plan ready, nor could they have. Joffre's plan had depended upon attacking as early in the year as possible. This had been discarded in favour of a more grandiose operation. To admit that the enemy was about to retire and evacuate the salient it had been intended to pinch out, was to admit failure, that Joffre had been right and Nivelle wrong.

Like all the members of the G.A.N. Staff, I had been convinced for some time that the Germans would withdraw to the Hindenburg Line, and for days I had been bombarding G.H.Q. with reports that they were going.

News of the impending retirement arrived daily through prisoners and deserters; rumours reached us also through the simple yet mysterious process of direct communication between the trenches, which existed in places where posts were close together and where somehow a more or less honest although totally prohibited system of inter-communication existed.

These occult channels had their origin in an irrepressible commercial instinct which impelled men who were quite ready to kill each other to resort to barter for the sake of exchanging surpluses for luxuries, rations or extra socks for cigars. When opportunity offered there was also a brisk trade in 'souvenirs'. Buttons were the small change in such transactions.

To watch this process was like witnessing the birth of trade and commerce between prehistoric tribes, and reflection did not convince one that the fundamental basis of intercourse between nations had changed greatly since those early days.

I knew a sector where, when the Germans held up an ancient top hat on the end of a long stick, the French answered by a similar signal. These battered tokens of respectability were also signals of peace. As soon as they were both up, the men on either side showed themselves in perfect confidence, and at night there was much honest bartering of schnapps for chocolate.

The understanding had been initiated by a division of old French Territorials: they had taken off their helmets and pointed to their bald heads, and Fritz had understood that these were ancient fellows, men of peace, who wanted no more than the absolute minimum of

fighting compatible with the tiresome and dangerous urge of high personages at the back who never forgot there was a war on, nor ceased in their endeavour to instil murderous activity. But one day, unknown to the Germans, the old fellows were replaced by a division whose commander had a reputation for energy to keep up, a man on whom the Grand Quartier had an eye for promotion. The top hat did not appear for a day or two, and suddenly one night there was a rush over from the French side. Grenades fell by the dozen amongst the somnolent Germans. Men wielding long rifles at whose ends were affixed long thin bayonets loomed out of the darkness on the parapet. They showed no mercy. Moppers-up, knives between their teeth, clubs in their hands and grenades in their haversacks, explored the dug-outs.

It was a bad end to a wartime idyll, but such episodes generally ended in tragedy. They did not work, any more than keeping hares or small tame birds as pets does.

Some years after the war I met a German officer, a very nice fellow, who said he liked the medieval idea of enemies being friendly when they were not actually engaged in fighting. But there was nothing of the medieval warrior in the elderly men who showed their bald pates to the Germans. Had they been safe at home they would probably have fought battles with matches in cafés, shouted, banged on tables and generally sounded terribly blood-thirsty. It was just that they were old and weary, and, having a first-hand knowledge of war, they hated it.

My reports that the Germans were withdrawing opposite the G.A.N. only confirmed the British Operations section in the conclusion they had already come to, for the evidence they had was convincing.

There were many signs: persistent sounds of convoys at unusual places at night; special activity where dumps were known to exist, only explicable if they were being removed; extraordinary noises of hammering as if machinery was being dismantled, and outbreaks of gunfire where obviously no attacks were intended. These were assumed to be meant to cover the rumblings of transport which could nevertheless be heard. The Intelligence reported that several German Army Headquarters were falling back; twenty-five localities were said to have been evacuated by the civil population, and several bridges over the Oise in the neighbourhood of Noyon had been blown

up. Trenches had been cut across some roads, and a German officer captured by the British on the Somme had stated that if the French advanced they would find everything mined, roads, villages and bridges. There was also an undoubted decrease in the German artillery on the G.A.N. front, especially in medium and heavy guns, amounting, it was estimated, to as much as forty-five per cent.

We knew, too, that the Germans had been blowing up bridges in their back areas ever since the middle of February. Six important ones had been destroyed, and more were now being added to the list. Factories were being stripped, and the fields remained unsown in the large zone in front of the Hindenburg Line.

Day by day the enemy was giving ground on the front of the British Fifth Army. By March 1st the Australians had occupied the villages of Puisieux and Gommecourt, and were within a couple of thousand yards of Bapaume.

At Clermont we wondered with increasing exasperation when General Nivelle would allow d'Espercy to pounce on an enemy who, we felt, was in process of fading away like a ghost.

All the information concerning the German movements which was passed on to Beauvais could not shake the high authorities there out of their complacency. They seemed to go deaf or become absorbed in quite a different subject as soon as the question of a probable German retirement was mentioned. Their attitude was so amazing that very distinct signs of irritation had for some time been perceptible at the outer fringe of the great organization at the G. Q. G. The mortification felt at an inactivity verging on coma now gained ground inwards, gradually including more of the concentric rings surrounding the Commander-in-Chief and his immediate Staff. Even trained staff officers, an unheard-of thing in French military circles, became openly and harshly critical of the Third Bureau, the keepers of the sacred arcana of their profession. These feelings, especially amongst Intelligence officers, verged on exasperation when as late as the first week in March these pundits, blind and obstinate, still persisted in echoing and enlarging upon the views of the Commander-in-Chief and d'Alenson, flatly refusing to recognize the fact of the German retreat.

General Nivelle was faithfully adhering to a principle of Napoleon's which he had quoted at the London conference of January 17th—'You should never attempt to guess what the enemy intends to do'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Les Armées françaises dans la Grande Guerre*, Tome V, i, p. 212.



Which proves that men of genius should never write axioms, for lesser lights apply them without understanding, much as in some native communities prayers which at their origin were, no doubt, conceived by men of spiritual vision, are copied out and pasted on the stomach as a cure for colic by faithful and painstaking congregations of later generations.

General d'Esperey was persuaded the enemy was going, but he had become a convert to the idea that he was withdrawing so as to make troops available for an attack in Lorraine. Much to my disgust I had to transmit to G.H.Q. his suggestion that the British should relieve the French as far as the Oise, to enable the latter to recover troops to meet this contingency. These views he expressed to General Rawlinson when he went to see him on March 3rd.

The Englishman, loose-limbed and long-striding, stalked out of his room to meet d'Esperey. Presently, after they had both looked at a large map and discussed one or two points of detail, Rawly, putting his hand over the wide space lying in front of the Hindenburg Line, said: 'The Germans are going all right'. Then, dropping into a chair, he put his finger on his nose, drew up his eyebrows until they were level with the top of his head, and with wide eyes and a knowing expression declared—'I knew the Boche was up to something. I've said so for weeks. What comes next?'

General d'Esperey, square and compact, leaning forward as he stood with knees braced and hands clasped behind his back, gave the impression that his fists were secured to the wall by some invisible chain which alone prevented him pouncing on his interlocutor. Staring out of his dark eyes with a keen hard gaze, he answered with a fury he found it hard to conceal. 'Yes, the Germans are going in front of me, if they have not gone already, but I am helpless, I can do nothing.' He then developed his reasons for thinking an attack in Lorraine probable, while General Rawlinson, screwing up his face, said that an attack on Ypres was more likely, 'unless', he added, 'they are not going to attack at all, which means they can't attack'. This may sound trite, but during the war the simplest truths were not necessarily those most quickly grasped.

Together with General Davidson, who had come over from G.H.Q. for the purpose, the two generals discussed arrangements for the G.A.N.'s projected attack. Some of the details concerning the artillery support that the Fourth Army was to give d'Esperey's left were settled. The British officers asserted once more that

it was quite impossible that the infantry should take any part in the attack, owing to the weakening of the Fourth Army by the extension of its front.

On March 4th, the day that Sir Douglas Haig sent his deliberately delayed answer to General Nivelle's peremptory commands, General d'Esperey, who had repeatedly begged to be allowed to launch an *attaque brusquée* to catch the Germans on the run, made a further endeavour to persuade the Grand Quartier to allow him to act before it was too late.

He asserted that there could be no possible doubt that the enemy were not only planning to withdraw to a position some twenty kilometres in rear of their present one, but that at the present moment they were actually carrying out the various movements preparatory to their retreat, and had in fact already withdrawn certain formations such as headquarters, aerodrome equipment and some lines-of-communication units.

D'Esperey went on to point out that if the withdrawal took place either before or during the artillery preparation of the G.A.N., the French plan was bound to fail.

It is therefore necessary to modify it [he wrote]. The sooner we attack the more chance we shall have of surprising the enemy and of capturing that portion of his artillery which has not yet been withdrawn.

He concluded by again suggesting an *attaque brusquée*, to be launched on the second day of the artillery preparation, which would be limited to the first German position. The G.A.N. could launch such an attack at six days' notice. If it were desired to attack beyond the second position, tanks might be employed.

On the 6th, d'Esperey wrote again, expressing his views in even greater detail.

These communications caused nothing but annoyance to the *illuminati* at Beauvais. Like so many Dr. Panglosses they were persuaded that all was for the best in the best of worlds. To find d'Esperey, apparently contaminated by the same ideas as his British neighbours, joining in the tiresome and almost subversive chorus, 'The Germans are going, the Germans are going', was exasperating. Surely he must realize that such a contingency would upset the plans of the Grand Quartier Général?

It was not till the 7th that General Nivelle answered d'Esperey's

letter of the 4th, and a more astonishing document than his reply can hardly ever have been produced during the war. To find a parallel to its obstinate assertion of an untenable hypothesis, one would have to go back to *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which Petruchio would have it that the moon was shining at midday, and that an old man was a 'fair lovely maid'.

On the front of the G.A.N. [wrote General Nivelle] there is no material indication which allows one to conclude that the voluntary withdrawal of the Germans will extend to this region.

There seems little likelihood that the enemy will abandon without fighting, and indeed without resisting to the utmost, one of the principal pledges he holds on our soil, that is to say the line nearest Paris, which includes Roye, Noyon and Soissons.

In any case it is impossible to base a decision on a hypothesis.

I decide therefore not to change in its general lines the plan of operations for 1917.

So much for the denial of self-evident facts, but the hesitation and contradictions revealed in the latter part of this document were almost as extraordinary.

As regards the eventualities that may arise on the front of the G.A.N., two main possibilities may be considered.

1. A withdrawal of the enemy before the date of the attacks.
2. A withdrawal while the attacks are in progress.

It is obvious that the important point is to obtain, in the first place, precise information as to the attitude of the enemy, and to find out at what moment he intends to withdraw if this is his intention. This result could be obtained by frequent raids, in the first case, and by reconnaissances during the preparation, in the second.

If the retreat takes place, it can be followed up energetically, but only employing the strictly necessary effectives, so as to create reserves of which I can avail myself on other parts of the front as circumstances may develop.

In the arrangements which the G.A.N. may desire to study in the event of a possible German retreat on its front of attack, it is important not to change the plan as a whole except in the case of its being absolutely impossible to do otherwise.

The attack prepared by the G.A.R. should not be influenced by any retreat that may be envisaged. This attack should,

naturally, be conceived and executed with all the greater strength so that it may become the principal attack. The reserves that may be created on the G.A.N. front may be employed to reinforce or to prolong the attack of the G.A.R. Instructions have already been given in this sense, so that the preparation of the ground and all the necessary dispositions relative to an extension of the front of attack east of Reims may be pushed forward as rapidly as possible.

To the staff of the G.A.N. the procrastinating attitude of the Grand Quartier, as revealed by this document, seemed nothing short of a scandal.

On the 8th I went to Montreuil to report. To my astonishment I found that General Charteris, Head of the Intelligence branch at G.H.Q., shared the opinion of the Grand Quartier that the Germans were not withdrawing on the G.A.N. front. Fortunately General Davidson and the whole of the Operations section were persuaded that they were.

On the 9th the French raided the German lines at several points. I was present at one of these raids. Although their artillery work was anything but good, the French reached their objectives at every point without difficulty, and the German artillery reaction was insignificant. The obvious conclusion was that the German front line system could be had at any moment for the asking. But still General Nivelle made no sign.

On the same day General d'Esperey went in to Beauvais to make one more attempt to convince the Commander-in-Chief that it was entirely wrong to allow the enemy to carry out his obvious intention without interference. He begged for tanks, as being the best weapon to hustle the enemy with the least loss of time, but failing tanks he proposed a thirty-six-hour bombardment.

As was to be expected, his intervention was badly received, and he returned to Clermont rather bewildered. General Nivelle had maintained his point of view that the enemy would only fall back if strongly attacked, yet he had again spoken, as he had in his *instruction* of the 7th, of withdrawing divisions from the G.A.N., to send them to the G.A.R. to broaden the front of attack there.

How then did he envisage the situation?

If the Germans opposite the G.A.N. were not withdrawing, and it would take a powerful attack to dislodge them, where was the sense in

weakening the force allotted after careful calculation as being necessary for this operation?

The Staff of the G.A.N., in despair, decided to accumulate fresh evidence every day and to submit it to the Commander-in-Chief, in the hope that one day an avalanche of irrefutable facts would overwhelm him into conviction.

Meanwhile the troops, like a devout multitude prostrated before some unseeing idol, waited, praying for a sign.

On the 10th, news came that the British Fifth Army had captured Irles; Gough's Intelligence came to the conclusion that the enemy was falling back according to a carefully-drawn-up time-table.

By the 11th, the head of the Third Bureau at the Grand Quartier Général, whatever his superiors may have thought, at last became convinced that the enemy might be going to withdraw on the G.A.N. front. He drew up on that day a preparatory plan for the withdrawal of no less than twenty divisions from General d'Esperey's command, which were presumably to be employed to reinforce the G.A.R. attack.

But these views had not yet received official sanction. On the same day, General d'Esperey published a general order which paraphrased the instructions he had received from General Nivelle.

It began as follows:

The Commander-in-Chief has decided not to alter in any essential the plan of operations for 1917, and, further, in the measures which the G.A.N. may be called upon to study in the event of the enemy's falling back, every effort should be made to change nothing in the general plan unless it is absolutely impossible to do otherwise.

But, needless to say, General d'Esperey's own instructions to his Armies were so couched as to enable them to pounce with the minimum delay as soon as the Commander-in-Chief's leave could be obtained.

Still the Belshazzars of Beauvais feasted on their dreams, while the Germans, harried by Gough and frightened by the shadow of d'Esperey's Armies, hastened their preparations, and instead of carrying out the grand final movement on March 16th as they had intended, began quietly slipping away on the 11th in the north and on the 13th in the south.

By the 12th there was no further need to hunt for evidence to convince the G.Q.G. The French First Army reported that on the

previous day forty different villages on their front were in flames, that the Noyon water reservoir had been blown up and that there had been an explosion in Noyon Station; that the enemy had created vast inundations and many roads were already under water, and finally that nine railway bridges south of Noyon had been blown up as well as bridges elsewhere.

The British Fourth Army also reported numerous fires between the Hindenburg Line and the present German lines, and also that the enemy was carrying off all the agricultural implements in this area.

On the 13th, the day the London Conference ended, it was found that on the previous night the German artillery had fallen back east of the Roye-Noyon Road on the front of the I Colonial Corps (French Third Army).

This made it quite obvious that, even were it to attack at once, the G.A.N. would probably be too late, at least during the first stages of the operation. In vain did General d'Esperey, now almost beside himself with exasperation, extend the scope of his operation—on paper — and send preparatory orders to the tanks to move into the area of the Third Army in readiness to attack. The orders could neither be issued nor the tanks be sent rumbling forward, for the Grand Quartier, apparently once more swimming in Lethean waters, seemed to have forgotten the present in rapturous contemplation of the rosy future when the triumphant armies would march to the Rhine the day its great plan came true.

I informed G.H.Q. that General d'Esperey was about to issue orders modifying those issued on the 11th in the light of these latest developments, but that, presumably owing to General Nivelle's absence in London, these could be neither sanctioned nor sent out.

On the 15th, the G.A.N. at last got leave to begin the bombardment which was to herald the assault, but a positive order from General Nivelle forbade the use of tanks.

It was too late; a bombardment was out of the question, for already the infantry was everywhere overrunning the German front line trenches, save to the north, where the rearguards of two good German divisions, the 23rd and 26th, held their ground. French patrols had penetrated to Beuvraignes Church without opposition.

So the advance began, and in the flames of burning villages lighting up the plain, in the black reeking clouds of smoke and amidst the columns of dust thrown up into the air as bridges, roads and

dumps blew up in the blighted zone the Germans were evacuating, General Nivelle's great dream lost shape and substance, drifted away into the darkened sky and vanished, as had so many other hopes and plans conceived in faith and written in blood during those merciless years.

At the Grand Quartier consternation reigned. Its corridors were haunted by officers whose long faces and disconcerted mien were in strong contrast to their self-assurance of forty-eight hours before.

These men realized the full import of what had happened; but they had learnt many things since 1914, and if their first thought was for the great plan gone awry, their second was for public opinion. What would France say? And so without loss of time *communiqués* of victory were published: the enemy was falling back under pressure, the French were in pursuit, pressing his rearguards, harrying his retreat.

Soon everyone believed in the victorious advance; France heaved such a sigh of relief at feeling the iron grip of the Germans relax that even those who knew what had happened were carried away by the universal joy. It would in fact have been brutal, and certainly it would have been looked upon as treachery, to decry what was universally accepted as a triumph for the Allied arms.

It was whispered that General Nivelle was an early convert to the idea of victory. The dubious laurels lay there and he stooped to pick them up. Before long he was proclaiming that had he been in a position to direct the German armies he could not have given them orders more favourable to his plans than those they were carrying out.

And the country was so happy at first, then so indignant as the scale and vindictive savagery of the German destruction became known, that the errors of the Command remained unperceived, and the public, unable to realize that the retreat was the logical consequence of the Somme, praised Nivelle, while Joffre, whose manoeuvre and will had imposed it, sat alone and forgotten, musing in the immense and solitary room at the Ecole de Guerre, his powerful head in his hands, his light blue eyes looking straight ahead from under shaggy colourless eyebrows, reminiscent in his concentrated strength and in his solitude of the sphinx staring out eternity in the desert







IN THE FRENCH FRONT LINE



A CAPTURED GERMAN TRENCH

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE ALLIED ADVANCE

FROM March 15th I lived in the wildest rush. As the armies began to move forward new problems of liaison arose. Furthermore, G.H.Q. ordered me to follow the German retreat closely. I was to report on the tactics of the enemy rearguards and on those of the pursuing French.

A divisional order captured on the 14th had given us some idea of the German plan of retreat. In the case of the division in question, the *1st Guard Reserve Division*, it was to fall back to the Hindenburg Line in three stages, under a weak rearguard of 330 men, twelve machine-guns and six field guns.

By now we had a very fair notion of the method by which the actual garrison was being withdrawn. Generally the supports withdrew just before midnight, the garrison proper at 4 a.m. and the covering troops at 6 in the morning.

As was to be expected, the enemy in the first instance evacuated the Roye salient, and his first and second lines north and south of the Avre were found to be empty.

General d'Esperey wished to develop an outflanking movement with his left in conjunction with the British, but this was no easy matter, nor was the delimitation of a dividing line between the French and British Armies easy either, for each was bent on handing over to the other as much ground as possible. Moreover the British Fourth Army, weak as it was, and in danger of being held up by the slightest resistance, was now threatened with being still further weakened by G.H.Q., for the latter was rivalling the Grand Quartier in its hunt for units with which to build up reserves.

A satisfactory arrangement was however finally reached at a small conference held at Fourth Army Headquarters on March 15th. General Rawlinson was present, and as usual was both conciliatory and broad-minded. He met the French as far as he could, and on only one point did General d'Esperey fail to obtain satisfaction: Ham, which he wished to hand over to the British as soon as it was occupied, was firmly refused. The line dividing the Anglo-British

forces was to pass some three miles north of it and was to run straight towards St. Quentin.

Friday the 16th was a day of great turmoil and excitement. General d'Esperey sent for me in the early part of the morning. As usual upon great occasions, he was racing round his office at speed, giving the impression that if a door opened suddenly he would instantly escape. He told me that once more he had asked the Grand Quartier for tanks. 'I will launch them against the second German position if the enemy has not been driven from it by the infantry before they arrive,' he said. 'If we can only pin him to his ground I shall be ready to attack his second position on the 18th.' I entirely sympathized with him in his suppressed rage at seeing the Germans escaping. 'The least the Grand Quartier can do now is to give me the means of tripping up the Germans as they run,' he said. 'General Micheler thinks they are going on his front too.' Another interval while I turned on my heels, the centre of the circle round which the Group Commander was gyrating. 'It may yet be possible at least to overwhelm their rearguards; who can tell what might happen if we tumbled into the Hindenburg Line together with the Germans?'

He stopped suddenly. '*Bon*, that will do.' He waved a hand. The interview was over. 'Keep your compatriots up to the mark. You can go. Stop. Tell General Rawlinson I am moving my Cavalry Corps up to the front by the most direct route.' Another wave of the hand, and I found myself on the other side of the door, where stood General d'Esperey's red-headed, ironical A.D.C., de Montegudet, the only man who could hold the job and survive. In these days he was always humming one of two tunes. I can still remember the words and lilt of the songs:

Elle a quelque chose de blanc, les dents,  
Elle a quelque chose de bleu, les yeux.

And the song went on, more and more intimate, more and more descriptive, no feature, shade or hue being omitted.

The other one was a quick breathless rat-tat:

C'est la p'tite Nana, c'est la p'tite Nana,  
C'est la petite Nana d'Amérique,

no doubt in honour of President Wilson, whose attitude at that period was in process of changing from the reluctant to the approximately bellicose.

'Well,' said Montegudct, 'still alive?' 'Yes,' I answered, 'but rather giddy.' 'He takes a bit of exercise upon these occasions,' said Montegudet, 'but he's grand. Tell me, does he race round the furniture that stands in his way or jump over it? Nobody seems to know.'

Shortly afterwards General Rawlinson rang me up. 'When was he to begin the bombardment?' He was bellowing down the telephone, I realized, though his voice sounded faint and distant. 'Immediately,' I screeched back over and over again down the bad line, till my voice broke and I could only cough. At last he heard.

My main task that day was to synchronize the movements of the adjoining Franco-British corps. My one fear was that our Fourth Army would be unable to keep up, but this apprehension was not realized. The British line although weaker found no difficulty in keeping pacc with the French.

As the G.A.N. was the attacking force, I obtained agreement that the IV British and its neighbour the III Corps should conform to the movements of the French XIV Corps (now temporarily enlarged so as to form a Group) on the left of the French line. But General Marjoulet, its Commander, began immediately to make demands on his neighbours far in excess of their capabilities. Indeed this particular difficulty continued during the whole of the advance. I had to complain to General d'Esperey and there was quite a breeze, but he upheld the British.

General Marjoulet was a big, solid fellow with a tiny little head and beady, sharp, suspicious little eyes from between which projected a nose like a flint arrowhead. Mistrust seemed to be his dominant characteristic, mistrust of himself to start with, then in order of precedence mistrust of his chiefs and of his subordinates.

His Staff did not cherish him, which is hardly to be wondered at since he never had any but official communication with any of them, and then invariably by means of written memoranda and notes. He never in any circumstances trusted anyone sufficiently to express a personal opinion. He was always ill-used, always complaining, always making notes in a tidy, tiny little handwriting made up of rows and rows of minuscule pointed letters as sharp as his own susceptibilities.

Nevertheless this odd man was a good Corps Commander. A corps was his maximum capacity, for he could carry out orders. He would never have had the initiative, the independence or the character to command an Army.

On the 17th there was a general advance. The British occupied Chaulnes and Bapaume, the French Roye. In the morning a wild hunt for a cavalry commander led me to Compiègne. As I drove into the dapper, dainty little town which I had not seen since 1914, I saw myself once more racing into the place one early morning in August when with a French officer, killed a few months later, I came to beg Sir John French to give support to the French Fifth Army, engaged in the desperate adventure of the Battle of Guise, and something of the poignant anxieties of those days came back to me as my memory conjured up the ragged ghosts of the II Corps staggering down the road blinded by exhaustion. The scene was very different now. A French infantry regiment, rested and strong, was marching by at attention, its drums beating, its trumpets flourished with a magnificent swagger as the men raised them, to blare out one of those marches of which their race has the secret – a martial, daring, cheerful call which always evokes the great forward sweep of charging infantry.

There was great excitement at the moment, for a Zeppelin had been brought down at dawn that morning. The first rays of light had revealed it, and within a few minutes the guns had found the range. There had been a flash of light at its nose which had raced along its back, then huge flames and the impression of something falling in an empty sky, a great explosion, then a crash. There it lay, an enormous mass of twisted aluminium, on either side of a wall, nothing to show what its shape had been, not a trace of the splendid ship that had so lately sailed the skies.

In the afternoon my work took me into the zone of the First Army, and there I accidentally met General Nivelle. He called me up to him, and in an extremely sarcastic tone said that the British were progressing more slowly south of the Somme than their French neighbours, and asked me how I accounted for this. I found it hard to keep my temper, but answered that his information seemed to be hardly correct, for the Fourth Army, although weakened and over-extended so as to relieve the maximum possible number of French troops, was roughly in line with its neighbours. I was certain of this as I had been to the point of junction to make sure that there was good liaison. I added that it would not be astonishing if, on the Somme, we were not so far forward, as General Rawlinson had concentrated what strength he had next to the French to help their advance. There was also something the French Commander-

in-Chief did not know, but which I was glad to tell him, namely that General d'Esperey himself had suggested that the British IV Corps should follow the French XIV in echelon, but this had not been necessary as the British were keeping up. In conclusion I told General Nivelle that it was possible there might be points where the French had gained more ground than ourselves, but that there were others where I knew we were ahead of them.

I saluted and walked away. This was the last conversation I ever had with General Nivelle.

By this time it was reckoned that the hour of the cavalry had struck. Our corps cavalry and cyclists were leading the Fourth Army advance, and the French also had some mounted detachments ahead, but the engagement of whole cavalry divisions was quite another matter. There was much talk of what they could achieve, and a great deal of complicated staff-work was consecrated to the extremely difficult problem of pushing great masses of horsemen through the infantry, and of feeding men and animals in the desert beyond the German trenches, supplies depending upon what could be squeezed through the bottle-neck of the precarious passages hastily improvised over the trench system.

The British Fifth Army had ordered the Lucknow Cavalry Brigade forward on the morning of the 17th, and General d'Esperey told me to inform my chiefs that as soon as Noyon was captured he intended to push a cavalry division and two regiments of Spahis forward in an endeavour to cut off as large a body of the enemy as possible between the Oise and Soissons.

While I was hunting for the French cavalry so as to arrange a plan whereby they would first gain and then maintain touch with the British, I had one of those comic little adventures which kept us amused for days.

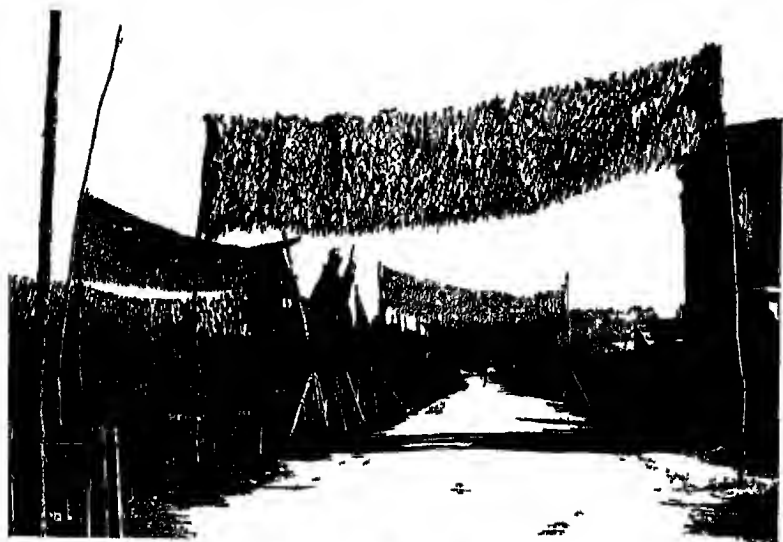
I had arrived at a village where I hoped to get information concerning the whereabouts of the divisional headquarters, and seeing some dragoons began to walk towards them. I espied an officer a little way off. No sooner did he see me than he lifted his arms in the air and began to run in the opposite direction. I called to him to stop and began running after him, but could not catch up with him. We raced down the main street, while the tall dragoons leading their horses to water stopped in amazement. Being French they perhaps

concluded that this was an affair of the heart, and that I was in pursuit of a successful rival.

I caught up with my man at the end of the village where regimental headquarters were established. He popped his head inside several doorways, shouting "The Interpreter! Where is the Interpreter?" This explanation of his flight made me angrier than ever, for the one thing upon which I flattered myself was that I could speak French. He refused to listen to my indignant protests in his own language, and insisted on continuing his search. To my astonishment, when the Interpreter was at last unearthed, I found myself confronted with a doctor who had looked after me just before the war in the South of France. He spoke English and was proud of it. It seemed that his brother officers, although doubting his capacity, had nicknamed him 'The Interpreter' in acknowledgment of a claim that had become a standing joke. They had spent the whole war asking him night after night to translate the most impossible words into English, and had hoped that one day they might meet a British soldier upon whom they could test his fluency. I was to furnish the long-awaited opportunity: hence the chase.

Before I could get the information I wanted, the doctor and I had to carry on an animated conversation in English, which we were happy to do, for we were old friends and very glad to meet again.

That evening I had the satisfaction of seeing the French and British flanking units in touch with each other in the village of Damery. In one small village consisting of a single upright wall, the exhilaration of the advance had so far melted the barrier of reserve that usually existed between the allies that I found a group of French and British soldiers who had exchanged helmets and were actually pressing souvenirs on each other, while a little farther back, in what was I suppose a company mess in the entrance of a cellar from which the rubble had been removed, a stout and very martial French second lieutenant of about forty-five, bearded and eloquent, was making a long speech to a small group of appreciative British officers. He had in his hand a large tin cup full of something evidently very potent. Whenever he showed signs of flagging, a very tough-looking British subaltern with a twinkle in his eye would call out — 'Go on, Major', and this tribute to himself as a man, this recognition by an ally of the fact that this was indeed the rank which should have been his had merit alone counted, sent him flying off again, after taking another sip at the cup, carried away on the wings of a rejuvenated eloquence:



(top) CAMOUFLAGED ROAD  
(bottom) THE ROYE-NOYON ROAD





'Messieurs, that noble country, England, so long hidden from our unseeing eyes, now our sister, our dear sister . . .' 'Go on, Major!' 'Messieurs . . .' But I was off, and the last thing I heard as I left that village was a chorus of sturdy British voices shouting: 'Go on, Major!'

For me March 18th was a day of such excitement that I all but persuaded myself for a few hours that I was taking part in the victorious advance the *communiqués* were describing.

It was September 1914 all over again.

The British advanced north and south of Péronne, and occupied the town itself and Mont St. Quentin, the wicked hill to the north of it from which the Germans had watched and plagued us during the whole of the Battle of the Somme. That evening our troops were lining the river south of Péronne for a considerable distance, but were unable to throw a bridge over until nightfall. French and British entered Nesle together, and General d'Esperey placed a cavalry division at the disposal of each of his Armies.

Together with a French officer of the *chasseurs à pied*, Paul Keller, one of two brothers to whom I was greatly attached for their charm, courage and high intellectual qualities (one was a musician of no mean talent, and the other a great connoisseur of French literature and poetry), I attempted to get into touch with the advanced guards on the French front.

We got our car over the French and German trenches on a road built during the night. It was not very good, but by dint of pushing the car, racing ahead of it and throwing bricks into the deeper holes, in fact carrying out what were literally running repairs to the surface, we got across in a reasonably short time.

Lassigny, the first place we reached, had of course been destroyed by shell-fire and was just a replica of the villages on our own side; but from Lassigny onwards we entered into a kind of booby-trap land, so that it was impossible to escape a sense of dangerous unreality, a sort of living nightmare, as if the whole country was under an evil spell.

Most of the trees on either side of the road were three-quarters sawn through. Several had fallen and had to be cleared out of our way. Others were swaying dangerously: a strong gust and dozens would have crashed, flattening us out like flies under a fly-whisk if we had had the misfortune to find ourselves in their way.

To add to the amenities, a little farther on, at a cross-roads, a land-mine under the roadway, fired by a long-delay-action fuse, had

just blown up, bringing down several trees. Some military waggons lay at the bottom of the crater, which was some fifty or sixty feet deep. Dead men and dead horses were mixed horribly with broken wood-work and wheels, all half-covered with earth and trees. A team of horses, their backs broken, a tree lying on top of them, kicked and struggled by the crater's edge.

We managed to get round this ghastly obstruction by driving the car into a field, over branches laid down in front of it.

Some of these land-mines, we were to learn to our cost, were timed to go up many days, even weeks, later, several with a delay of as much as forty days, and the engineers had a busy time hunting for them. Not all were found, unfortunately, and some of them inflicted considerable casualties, as for example when the Town Hall at Bapaume blew up a week after the British had occupied the place, killing two French Deputies and some Australians who were sleeping there.

At the village of Dives we found that two men had been killed picking up a tempting bit of German equipment lying on an innocent-looking heap of rubbish. A dozen grenades had gone off together, blowing away the face of one man and lacerating the other horribly.

The Germans had displayed really fiendish ingenuity in devising the most dangerous snares and traps. A wire drawn across a dark step leading into a dug-out or cellar would trip up anyone who entered and explode charges which would bring the roof down on his head and bury him alive. Cunningly concealed wires attached to the most innocent-seeming implements, a bucket, a broom, would explode a couple of slabs of gun-cotton, and so on.

From Dives onwards we began to observe the strange phenomenon of villages not destroyed by shell-fire, not even in many instances burnt, but deliberately torn down piecemeal by hand, evidently at the cost of immense labour.

It was obvious that the heavy work involved had been carried out with enjoyment, with gusto. It was as if the whole countryside had fallen into the hands of demons who had vented their lust for destruction on all these humble dwellings.

In one place a heavy baulk of timber, evidently used as a battering ram, lay beside the wall it had knocked down. At another a long rope, fastened to the main beam of a cottage lying collapsed like a house of cards, showed how a hundred men or more had hauled at it

till the house came down. In the case of a more solidly built house that had resisted attempts to pull it down, the roof had been removed slate by slate, and a heavy wagon had been driven backwards and forwards over the debris as it lay in the road, while every window-frame had been smashed with hammers.

Not only were farm implements and carts carefully piled up and burnt, but men wielding heavy implements had smashed everything that had escaped the more general destruction.

The ruin was everywhere complete, although there were touches which showed that more time had been available at some places than at others; the will was nowhere lacking, but the vandals had been less hurried in some villages, that was all. It was as if Satan had poured desolation out of a gigantic watering-can, carelessly spraying some parts of the land more than others.

Man is naturally destructive, and most of us have a brutish side, but never in modern times has the bestial side of humanity been revealed so openly, so frankly and so blatantly as it was during those days in March 1917.

Everywhere in the ruined villages women's clothing lay about, underwear so arranged as to convey an indecent suggestion, or fouled in the most revolting way.

This clothing, the simple underwear of those French peasant women treated thus, filled me with a disgust and rage which went on increasing in the days that followed as the full extent of the German ravages was revealed. What my French companions can have thought I dared not imagine; I dared not even look at them.

The only person who said anything was the chauffeur. He had been having a bad time, hanging over the side of the car to see if he were clearing chasms, and gripping the steering-wheel which behaved as if it were smitten with palsy. None of the car's misadventures had extracted a word out of him as he sat with clenched teeth, but now, looking at the constantly repeated scenes of desolation, he kept muttering, oblivious of military discipline, 'The swine, the bloody swine!'

At the village of Larbroye we came to a full stop. A very large crater stood where the road had been, and there were garden walls on either side of it. Some Pioneers came along, however, and made a breach in these. Planks were laid over the stones and we got the Vauxhall over and were able eventually to rejoin the road.

We saw few signs anywhere of fighting having taken place. Only

here and there cover had been scratched by individuals with their entrenching tools as they had lain, caught by the fire of the German rearguards.

Presently we reached the Canal du Nord just outside Noyon. Here we had to leave the car. The canal was dry but the banks were steep and wide, and at the point where the road bridge had been, an enormous mine had exploded, forming a crater so large as to remind one of a Roman amphitheatre.

We scrambled over the canal, not without considerable difficulty, and found ourselves in Noyon. The place was empty of troops, and the cavalry barracks were a burning mass of smoke and flames.

We began to wonder if we had not somehow got ahead of the advanced troops, when we met a runner coming from the far end of the town. He told us that there were patrols ahead but that the supporting companies were not yet in the town. The Germans, according to him, were still in occupation of Mont St. Siméon, a couple of thousand yards east of Noyon.

The first inhabitants we met told us that the Germans had withdrawn at 10 that morning. It was now 2 p.m.

It was extraordinary, as we walked down the main street, to see how French flags began to appear everywhere. Some must have been carefully concealed ever since the German occupation of the town began in 1914, for they were wonderfully fresh and clean, though very creased from having been hidden away so long and folded small to escape detection. But most had been made within the last half-hour. A blue apron, a piece cut out of a white shirt, and a strip of red baize or petticoat, represented the French tricolour hanging outside many a house that afternoon in Noyon.

At first the streets were deserted, then they began to swarm with people. It was a population of women, children and very old men. There was not a young man in the place. Presently we learnt that there were some 10,000 people in Noyon, the normal population of which was 6,000, for the Germans had transferred there by lorries the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages they had destroyed. They had left placards in the trenches they had abandoned on which were written — 'Do not shell Noyon. There are 12,000 women and children there.' This was a chivalrous and kindly action, a real effort to protect all those innocents, and I am glad to be able to express my gratitude as well as my admiration for the generous conduct of the German Higher Command on this occasion. What



FRENCH INFANTRY CROSSING THE CANAL DU NORD



was a good deal less praiseworthy was that, so we were assured, one of the very last acts of the Germans had been to carry away fifty girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. What became of them I do not know.

Presently a few soldiers appeared as it seemed from nowhere and joined us, and as the people grasped the fact that the Germans had really gone, their timidity began to disappear. They crowded round us, tears of joy and gratitude running down their cheeks, and there were answering tears in our own eyes.

The old men, leaning on sticks, came very close to us as if for protection, but they found it hard to keep their places beside us in the press of silent, jostling, black-clad women.

Many just wanted to touch us, as if to make sure we were real. Others were content to stand back, leaning against their neighbours, making the sign of the cross, while from behind came a constant murmur—'*Dieu vous bénisse, Dieu vous bénisse.*'

Most of them were too shaken, too moved to express their feelings. They found it easier to make a gesture than to speak, to bless with a sign than to thank with a word. Only here and there there were whispers—'For two years we have waited . . .', 'God's name be blessed . . .', 'Deliverance at last.'

The women with children in their arms pressed forward more boldly than the others. They wanted the little ones to see us, held them up to us mutely so that we should put our hands on the bare curly heads.

One woman shaking with sobs put her little boy in my arms and stood there crying as if her heart would break, her arms hanging by her side.

And there was one young girl who looked like an angel, to whom I owe a debt I can never repay. She pressed forward through the others and stood before us. She had immense, almost violet blue eyes; I only saw them for a moment, then she bowed her head and they disappeared beneath her lashes. It is not easy to remember eyes, but I have never forgotten hers. Very timid now that she was close to us, too shy to look up at the tall men in front of her, she put into the hands of each of us a spray of laurel. Then she disappeared.

Those laurel leaves I have always kept in gratitude to one who, for me at least, lifted the war for a moment high above all sordidness and horror. Such is the power of beauty and innocence, that this young girl, by her mere presence, seemed to atone for and dispel the



scenes of vulgarity, wantonness and savagery with which our eyes had been filled that morning.

We moved on slowly towards the middle of the town. Getting about was by no means easy, for the Germans had blown up the culverts in the narrow streets.

I noticed that many young girls were wearing scraps of red, white and blue in their hair, and one mother brought a small child up to me and pointing at me said — 'See, an Englishman, a friend.' The lesson was not unnecessary, for at one point, having left my companions, I came round a corner on some children, who shrank away in fear of my uniform.

But the thing that was hardest to bear was the inquiries, the piteous questions about relatives and friends.

One elderly woman pressed up to me and whispered — 'Do you know Jacques Dumesnil, is he safe? He is my son, he is only a boy really, even now he can be only a boy. He was just a conscript at the beginning of the war, he had not been called up long, he was serving in the — Regiment.' And another, a woman with fear in her eyes, asked about her husband, Albert something I think his name was. 'He has never seen his son. Do you know where he is?' And she recited his regimental number, company, battalion and regiment.

There were many more. 'We thought you might have known him, Jean Duval, he was such a good shot, we thought you might have heard', and Paul, and Ernest, whom everyone in their village knew, and so on and so forth. We shook our heads, and the people round us apologized humbly, saying — 'We know it is difficult, of course, there are so many soldiers, but we thought perhaps . . .'

We could not answer. How could we? Their questions evoked, unbearably, a vision of wooden crosses, hundreds of thousands of little wooden crosses, battalions and armies of them, scattered all the way from Switzerland to the North Sea.

Eventually we got to the main square, still called the Magdeburger Platz, and decorated with the spick and span black-and-white German sentry boxes.

We interviewed the Adjoint du Maire, a fine and dignified person, but he was too shaken to be communicative.

Then the French 75's began to fire over the town at Mont St. Siméon. The shells screamed overhead, but this did not worry or

disturb the townful of women and children. Like old soldiers they knew the difference between the shell that was going wide and the shell that would drop near. There were probably children there who could not imagine the heavens silent and undisturbed by the great shells that tore across them, just as there are other children who have never seen a sky without birds.

I noticed how meticulously the boys saluted officers. They had been brought up in a harsh school. We were told that the Germans had made even the women salute them.

One old man drew me aside to whisper that the Germans had laid a trap, at any moment they would come back with harsh hurrahs, and he tried to imitate them: they would come charging down the street over there with fixed bayonets. The ancient one made me feel nervous. It seemed as if anything might happen in this strange town, standing undamaged and undefended in the new no-man's-land, under its canopy of mewing, moaning shells.

We began to walk back to the car. At a broken culvert we met the point of the infantry advanced guard, halted while some sappers hastily made a bridge of beams and doors. One of us took a photograph. As we stood there a woman ran out from her house holding in her hand some photographs and pages cut out of a German illustrated paper that must have been stuck on her wall by Germans billeted on her. Another pressed two picture postcards of the town into my hand, and said: 'Never forget Noyon', and I never have.

A little farther on we met the main body of the advanced guard marching in. The solid column of men in blue filling the entire roadway, pressing on like a piston in the cylinder formed by the street, was very striking, but that was as nothing compared with the impression made on us by the main body which we met at the exact point where the Compiègne Road crosses that from Lassigny.

There was something stern, relentless and massive about those regiments as they marched past, battalion after battalion, the cobbled road ringing under their heavy tread. It was as if they must drive the solid wedge of their formidable mass through any obstacle the Germans might attempt to put up. They seemed less like part of an army than Retribution itself, hard on the track of the enemy.

We passed a lot of artillery too, brigade after brigade following the infantry.

At one point, crossing trenches by a precarious bridge, our greatly

suffering car slipped into one, but a company of infantry soon pulled it out again: it deserved saving for it had been the first car to enter Noyon.

Ever since the first week of the war, day after day and year after year, Clemenceau had printed as a headline in *L'Homme Enchaîné* THE GERMANS ARE IN NOYON, to remind politicians and public of the grim reality that the German Army lay but sixty kilometres—less than forty miles—from Paris.

There is a story, whether true or not I do not know, that that night, March 18th, 1917, General Nivelle rang him up on the telephone, and when the fierce old man came on the line, said: '*Monsieur le Président*, the Germans are no longer in Noyon'.





(top) SCENE IN A RE-OCCUPIED VILLAGE  
(bottom) THE FIRST FRENCH NEWSPAPER AFTER THIRTY-ONE MONTHS

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE ADVANCE CONTINUES: TRENCH WARFARE

IN issuing his orders for the advance, General d'Esperey, who always discerned the essential point, had guessed that the troops would go forward timorously owing to their total ignorance of the conditions of open warfare, and that they were certain to forget the vital necessity of keeping in lateral touch with each other, without which combined operations on even the smallest scale would be impossible. In his instructions to his Armies, therefore, he impressed upon his subordinates that it was even more important to keep neighbouring formations informed of their situation and intentions, than it was to report these to higher authority.

He proved to be right, for the troops, conjured up out of their holes and lairs underground, were as if dazzled by the light of day. They hung about awkwardly, and above all things failed to keep touch with each other, just as their Commander had anticipated.

Liaison, liaison, why can't they maintain liaison? lamented the directing Staff. There was lack of co-ordination between artillery and infantry, both of which were lost now that they had left their telephones behind and could not rely upon rockets. Companies and even battalions lay helpless in front of a ruin or a ditch held by some snipers or a machine-gun, which a few shells would have cleared in five minutes; and it was impossible to get one battalion to concert a plan rapidly with the next.

And there were other difficulties: inability of the officers to discern the weak point in the enemy's line and to press forward into it, inability on the part of the infantry to use in the open their new small 37mm. gun against the scattered German machine-guns; a tendency to allow large bodies of troops to mass at given points where guns, convoys and infantry not only congested roads but offered good targets to the enemy. To cap all, there was a general lack of comprehension from brigades downwards of what the plans were and what the Command was trying to achieve.

It was not only the lower formations that were at fault. When it came to advancing, General Humbert, commanding the Third

Army, immediately anticipated the possibility of a massed attack on his left flank.

General d'Espercy, in a twinkling, imposed greater fear of himself than of the enemy in his subordinate's mind. The ability to 'out-Hun the Hun', and to become at any moment a moral force in rear more formidable than any physical force the enemy can accumulate in front, is a faculty every commander in war should possess.

The period we were now entering was one of the most extraordinary of the whole war. It was like a mirage of open warfare, the warfare of 1914, utterly strange to the new armies that had set in the mould of the trenches into which the nations had poured them for the last three years.

There were not many in the front line, even amongst the officers, who remembered those first few weeks before trench warfare began. The others had been killed or invalided home, or had ascended into the military Olympus, the mysterious region where dwelt those who understood the war, knew what it was about, and grasped the meaning of orders whose sense regimental officers so often found it hard to understand.

To walk about in the open, in close proximity to the enemy, indeed in pursuit of him, was a novel experience, almost more alarming than exhilarating. Men to whom jumping into a trench or diving into a dug-out at a sound had become second nature, felt as might an army of moles suddenly emancipated and ordered by superior authority to disport themselves in the light of day. Regimental officers, broken in to siege operations, were bewildered. The mysterious word 'tactics' echoed alarmingly but without any very precise meaning in their minds.

There were, however, some to whom the sensation of stepping out down the roads, so lately haunted only by furtive individuals or ghostly parties venturing forth under cover of darkness, was curiously stimulating. Almost it seemed to them as if they were bidding good-bye to trench life for ever.

What a queer life it had been. A life of intense discomfort, occasionally of terrible fear, but strangely simplified. How well each man had grown to know himself and his fellows. He loved the entity they formed, the callous, hard entity of which he was a part, which seemed so unaffected and indifferent when the stretcher-bearers came to carry away a comrade from the trench, where soon no

trace would be left either of the man himself or of the shell that had struck him down.

Life had been very similar in the French and British trenches, maybe it was not so very different in the German ones.

How many and how various they had been, those trenches: running through cellars at Arras, under factory walls near Vermelles, along slag-heaps near Loos, sandbagged above ground at Neuve Chapelle, sunk in mud in Flanders; and there were the trenches near Cambrai where moles pursuing their lawful occasions popped out of the parados by the score and fell and broke their backs on the duck-boards.

There were the animated trenches, full of comings and goings, where an intense ant-like life never ceased, and parties of all kinds were for ever passing; where orderlies, like Harrod's delivery men, were for ever appearing and demanding signatures on buff forms and giving the impression that business was not only good but well organized. There were trench junctions where specialists of all kinds gave each other rendezvous; sanitary men, drainage men, telephonists, engineers, tunnellers, sound-detection men, artillery observers, Intelligence Corps officers, camouflage artists. All would be well until those most unpopular of gate-crashers the trench-mortar men appeared with their nasty medieval contraptions. These invariably provoked sooner or later, but generally sooner, retaliation in kind, the horrible slow-flying bomb whose parabola no man could measure but which in a moment would burst with a wicked ghastly explosion that left you breathless and quivering.

There had been the quiet sectors where the garrison, prisoners of the trenches, had looked up for days at the long and narrow strip of sky above them, across which rolled the great white clouds; some men gazing thus had learnt to believe quite simply in Heaven, while others, inexpressibly bored, envied the saucy free aeroplane up aloft, so proud, so adventurous and so coquettish, as it played a game with the puffs of smoke that surrounded it.

Every man had known still, beautiful nights, when he had seen the Very lights, lovely white points like stars, descend slowly to earth; he had forgotten, enthralled by their beauty, that somewhere in no-man's-land the creeping patrol or the party working on the wire must be lying tense and still, fearful of discovery under the glare as enemies, finger on trigger, watched for the least movement. All had seen the rockets projecting shimmering sparks upwards as if someone



over there in the distance was playing at increasing the numbers of the myriads of tiny stars strewn so lavishly across the heavenly field; the rockets also had meant something—somewhere someone was afraid, was calling for help; but they too were beautiful.

On such nights even the occasional rat-tat of a machine-gun was not unpleasant, only familiar and expected, like the call of a nightjar that would be missed if silent.

Then the watcher, into whom something of the divine had penetrated as he stood there alone in the majesty of the night, would as likely as not be startled suddenly out of his mood by a quick violent bustle through the empty tins level with his face, as a rat dashed past, squealing, pursued by another.

Those rats, those enormous, hideous rats, hated for themselves, were loathed still more because of the thought none could avoid of the plentiful food that made them so big and lusty.

The still nights, the rare still nights, had belonged to the good times, as had the familiar village where the battalion went back to rest.

There, sometimes, down a lane, an insect, a bird or a flower would absorb attention, and a man's mind, relieved by fancy, would fly away to distant, happy, familiar places that knew not war. The skirt of the only pretty girl in the village would remind each man of other women he hoped to see again next leave — if, if . . .

And then the bad times, the times when life had been so nauseatingly dull, its sameness so depressing as to drive a man to the verge of insanity or mutiny.

The company mess in rest billets, cramped, untidy, promiscuous, with dripping mackintoshes piled outside; periscopes, sticks and map-cases heaped in corners; and newspapers irritatingly increasing their volume to the size of ground sheets as they spilt over tables and the backs of the chairs, could be depressing to the point of tears. Those were the days when even Bruce Bairnsfather, who rivalled *La Vie Parisienne* in his contributions to the morale of the commissioned ranks, could not raise a smile, and the smell of damp serge and steaming boots stretched out towards the hot stove made many a newly-joined subaltern feel sick.

There were the bad trenches, far more numerous, alas, than the good ones. Trenches full of water, mud everywhere, on face and eyelids, in the mouth, up sleeves, in pockets, in the useless tobacco pouch, when the cold seemed a living slimy thing whose icy, dripping fingers gripped a man's innards.

Vitality had been very low then. How like ghosts the troops had looked, packed together as they stood to arms in the hour before sunrise, in the wet, shelled trench; and this had been the daily experience of hundreds of thousands of men.

How had they survived day after day, week after week, month after month of it? How lived through shuddering dawn after shuddering dawn, holding with shaking hands rifle barrels that burnt with cold, bowing heads resigned to eternal suffering, as shells like giant scissors ripped the screeching air, adding their quota of horror to the new-born day, but impotent to do more than extract a twinge of the skin, the mechanical reaction of a missed heart-beat, an inward shudder, from bodies numbed into semi-insensibility?

All had known the depressing excitement and then the resignation of going up to a bad sector, loaded like mules, festooned like Christmas trees with strange objects. It was the common experience of everyone to have slipped on precarious duck-boards laid askew along shell-holes; constantly to miss a foothold, to stumble or fall into slime, while down the bedraggled line echoed the incessantly repeated warning, 'ware heads', 'ware telephone wire', 'ware bridge', 'ware hole'. The treacherous deep-biting barbed-wire ready to catch any who strayed (and who did not get lost for a few moments during reliefs?) would tear gashes in the flesh of hands and legs, while overhead sang and whimpered the splinters from occasional shells whose fuses chirruped irrationally, pursuing an erratic course that the acutely perceptive ear followed until they buried themselves with a thud in the wet earth.

What Calvaries they had been, some of those ways up to the line, and how heavy the cross every man bore as he dragged himself along.

The spaces that had to be crossed in the open before the communication trenches were reached have remained most vividly in my mind; those dangerous, bare, desolate regions scarred with old shell-holes, intersected by old trenches, where only barbed wire seemed to grow, and refuse accumulated just as it does in the drab desolation on the fringe of American cities.

Worse perhaps, but not so well remembered, was the heavily-shelled trench: the sudden hurricane of shells when the earth trembled and quaked and the walls vibrated, clods of earth that would kill a man, flung across from traverse to traverse, the air sounding as must an onrushing train to the man who has fallen in

front of it. That was the time when soldiers cowered in dug-outs, when solid self-respect was beaten into a jelly of fear, and many an officer was only saved in his own eyes by the example he must give.

Those were very bad times, when the trench, choked with dead and wounded, collapsed under the bombardment, when men worked with frenzy to dig out a comrade, pulled him out with his face collapsed, then dug no more. At such times often had come a stupor, a kind of overpowering sleepiness, merciful, but which the officer had to conquer, forcing himself to crawl or run to inspect his sector.

But worst of all was the trench under which the enemy was known to be mining. Sometimes you could hear him. Your own miners might be counter-mining, the small entrance of the shaft gaping black in the very front line. The men would observe that the posts near that point were being thinned, kept down to a minimum. Whole sections of trench would probably be evacuated at night. Down at battalion headquarters they must know that there was great danger.

The post would be relieved and go with, oh, such thankfulness, but the hours would speed by and the same men would have to go back to the same point for more hours of incredibly nerve-racking suspense. Some must have known then what it feels like to be a man on trial for his life, waiting while the jury deliberate whether they will send him to the gallows.

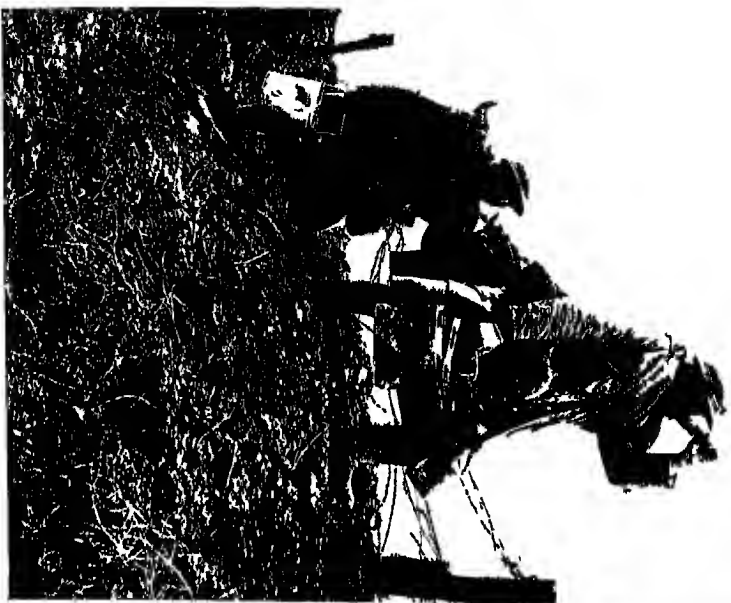
Relieved again, the agonizing suspense before the agonizing wait was resumed would give rise to the cowardly hope that the mine would blow up before it was time to return to the doomed spot.

Back in the line once more, the sounds of the underground race between their own miners and the Germans would make men's throats go dry with fear. Would the enemy gallery be blown up in time? Tap, tap, tap, was it friend or foe that sounded so close? Was that other sound in the night, over towards the German lines, the sound of wire being cut? If they were cutting their wire the time must be very close, for they would not prepare passages for their men to rush through much before the time appointed for the explosion.

If there was silence, that was even worse; for a little while before the mine went up, the tapping must cease, while deep underground the Germans laid the charge and put in the fuse.

And so it would go on, until suddenly the earth for half a mile round seemed to sideslip, and every man within five miles would stop suddenly at the sound of the great muffled roar, while those





CUSTOTS



PINARDIER (THE WINE RATION)

nearby saw an immense volcano of earth go up so high that it seemed to return to the ground very slowly. And of the post that had been on duty no trace would ever be found. The wait, the long-drawn-out wait of the war, ninety per cent of boredom, ten per cent of fear, was over for them.

The courage of the miners, the men of the Tunnelling Corps, working on all fours in foul air, risking every moment being buried alive, was something that exceeded my comprehension. Upon some occasions and for a very short time I went down a gallery in which they were working. As it grew narrower, the earth would begin to cling, the candle would flicker, and as I worked myself forward on my elbows my skin would go raw with fear. Strange that when death is always the same, some forms of it should be so much more terrifying than others. 'Tap,' a muffled voice from behind would say, and to my tap would come back the answering tap of the Germans. And to some this was just their work, their life; this incident an exciting though not unusual experience. To me it would have meant an existence worse than death. *Affaire de métier* I suppose. I have seen airmen shudder at the idea of going down in a submarine, and heard a submarine officer who had had many escapes expatiate on the incredible courage of those who fought in the air — *affaire d'habitude*.

But perhaps the real heroes of the trenches were not the miners and sappers but the cooks and ration parties who stumbled forward twice a day across the treacherous, dangerous open ground before the communication trenches began, heavily laden, hung with water-bottles, festooned with haversacks, determined to get through somehow to their thirsty and hungry comrades, however deep the mud, however heavy the shelling. Theirs was always the effort when vitality was lowest, in the early hours of the morning when man is nearest death, or in the darkness with none to watch or cheer or guide them.

I remember a day in 1915 when I was sent in liaison to the French troops on the Lorette Ridge. In an open space, before the shallow communication trench started, lay a soldier not long dead. With a movement of the head my French guide pointed to him and said — '*C'est un cuisinier*', just a cook, and I shall never forget the affection, the gratitude and the respect in his voice.

As the men of the new armies advanced across the area the Germans had abandoned, I thought of these things, and it was borne

home to me that for many of the young oncs, and for the boys who led them, subalterns who had gone straight from school into the army, the life of the trenches was the only adult life they knew.

During the whole of the advance I was plying my usual trade, endlessly on the move, attempting to co-ordinate operations, trying to prevent or dispel misunderstandings. A great deal of my time was spent in correcting or trying to obviate misconceptions of the written word, which I had learnt from experience often misled and which so often failed to convey the exact meaning of the writer. Clear and precise orders, apparently fool-proof, how often did they mysteriously reveal some loophole for misapprehension.

It was horribly depressing, wandering about the broken roads of that murdered countryside, and it was easy to understand, measured by *one's own feelings*, the bitter, *smouldering rage of the French* soldiers whose own country this was. Their anger gathered strength as time went by and the sense of wreckage sank into their souls.

It took many forms.

Prisoners who had hitherto had an extremely easy time, loafing to their heart's content under the benevolent eye of old Territorials whose own laziness created a firm bond of sympathy between themselves and their charges, were now, in some cases at least, made to work really hard. Those caught during the retreat, who therefore must have taken some part in the wanton destruction, were given a very bad time. Some were set to pull up their own old barbed wire with their bare hands and had to do so many yards a day or their food was not forthcoming. Others, still more unfortunate (or so it seemed to me), were placed under the orders of Alsatian N.C.O's, deserters from the German Army, who were up to every brutal trick of the Prussians. There was such a punishment camp at Noyon. A large placard in French and German sounded the note that prevailed there. It ran as follows:

Frenchmen,  
never forget what the Germans have done to France;  
they have stolen,  
pillaged,  
raped,  
murdered,  
and been guilty of incendiarism.  
Let the memory of these brigands be for ever engraved  
on your hearts.

When a man made any mistake or failed to display the requisite energy, as for instance when doing the goose-step not slapping his foot down in the approved way, under pretext that he was in a puddle, he was at once punished in the appropriate German manner. He was called out of the ranks, made to double, turn about every few steps and climb with the utmost alacrity any obstacle in his way, wall, water-cart or anything else. He was expected to march straight into any obstruction at his normal speed without halting or hesitating. If a natural reflex caused him to hold his face back from the wall, a none-too-gentle cuff on the back of the head counteracted his movement of self-preservation.

Another form of punishment consisted in making men crawl on their bellies in the mud, the whole proceeding being seasoned with a flow of hard, guttural and certainly uncomplimentary remarks in fluent German.<sup>1</sup>

The extraordinary thing was that the prisoners subjected to this treatment by ex-N.C.O.'s of their own army seemed to think it both natural and legitimate, at least so several of them said when I questioned them. One thing tended to mitigate their hardships and that was that the French fed them well. They were all eloquent on that point.

There were also some prisoners in cells awaiting trial by court martial, charged with arson or other crimes.

But there were some Germans taken at this time against whom no one could feel any anger. They belonged to new divisions and were mere children, who cried when they were captured. Half-grown and half-drilled, their own N.C.O.'s expressed the utmost disdain for them. But pity was mitigated by tales of the terrible treatment inflicted on the enslaved civilian population, as well as by accounts of the petty tyranny exercised even upon women, and by reliable reports that came in just then that the Germans were forcing our prisoners to build their obstacles in the forward area.

In the early days of the advance the congestion on the roads was

<sup>1</sup> The above was written in 1936. In 1938, when this book was just finished, I happened to read *Rubber Truncheon* by Wolfgang Langhoff, and was greatly struck to find much the same kind of brutality I have described, alleged to be taking place now in German concentration camps.

In another book read not long ago I came across these words attributed to a French writer of the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Writing of the Germans he says: '*Cette race, sans honneur et sans pitié*'.



frightful, and main bodies seemed to progress not at all behind advanced guards moving at a snail's pace.

Ahead of the advanced guards, lines of men in extended order moved across country, or rather they moved occasionally. Most of the time they halted, for the whole line came to a dead stop and lay down whenever any part of it met with resistance, real or suspected. There was more imaginary than actual opposition from the enemy, who showed but little fight and only held out at a few points.

The slowness of the advance was the less excusable in that the fields were not cut up by artillery fire and were no more difficult to walk over than any English field at that time of year. It was evident that the infantry had forgotten or had never learnt how to manoeuvre in the open.

The traffic blocks would have been the joy of any German gunner who could have trained his guns on them. These were caused, so far as the forward area was concerned, by troops and transport piling up from the rear against the paralytic advanced guards. The congestion could not be attributed to the need of sending either munitions forward or wounded back, for there were but few wounded and the guns had little cause to fire. Had there been large ammunition columns moving forward and coming back empty, the advance would in all probability have been held up altogether. As it was, had the enemy counter-attacked, it would have been well-nigh impossible, so the responsible officers said, to send up ammunition to the field artillery. The appalling confusion extended from the back areas right up to the zone in which the main bodies were advancing.

One of the chief causes of the traffic blocks in the zones occupied by the main bodies, especially during the early stages of the advance, was the heavy artillery. It moved forward in accordance with the original plan, practically on the heels of the leading infantry columns. Although some batteries carried their own bridges, and these in a few cases were useful, almost all the tractor-drawn artillery got stuck. There were many accidents.

We found that, after creating the most stupendous blocks involving some tens of thousands of men, not a single one of the 220 mm. tractor-drawn howitzers which had so effectively corked the roads down which whole corps were to advance (it had only been possible to repair one road per corps) had got through. Tracks had been allocated to the heavy guns, but finding these impracticable they had





(top) A TRAFFIC BLOCK IN THE FLOODED ZONE  
(bottom) THE MAIN STREET OF ROYE

struggled back to the roads and just sat there like the rock across the mouth of the robbers' cave, while staff officers, like so many Ali Babas unacquainted with the magic word, stood and cursed.

In the few cases in which tractor-drawn guns made any headway they had to be sent back owing to the danger of their causing congestion farther ahead, and the obvious impossibility of supplying them with ammunition should they be engaged. But even the elimination of these monsters did not clear the roads, and after they disappeared there were still traffic blocks lasting twelve hours or more. Even the horse-drawn artillery, which proved to be infinitely more mobile, advanced with the greatest possible difficulty. One group I myself saw took thirty-six hours to move four kilometres across country.

Let those who consider themselves hardly dealt with when they are delayed for five minutes in Piccadilly on the way to a theatre, imagine what it meant to be a soldier in the ranks in those March days, held up inexplicably hour after hour, sodden to the skin by driving sleet or snow, with no shelter other than that provided by a groundsheet thrown over head and shoulders, on a road that led he knew not whither, that just strung together ruined villages in a landscape of desolation. And there was little food, for no cooker could struggle past the serried masses of men and transport, nor could any cart thread its way through the lunar landscape of the trenches in rear and hope to find its unit. Like a great herd held up incomprehensibly on its way to the slaughter-house, the men stood or sat, dismal and resigned. When at last the column shook itself out of its paralysis and began to crawl forward, they were too exhausted to do more than drag themselves slowly along.

Many things which the troops had grown to rely upon during trench warfare had broken down, but nothing so completely as liaison. All telephonic communication had ceased to exist, and it had become necessary to devise new means to keeping in contact in every direction. It was particularly difficult to keep in touch with the artillery.

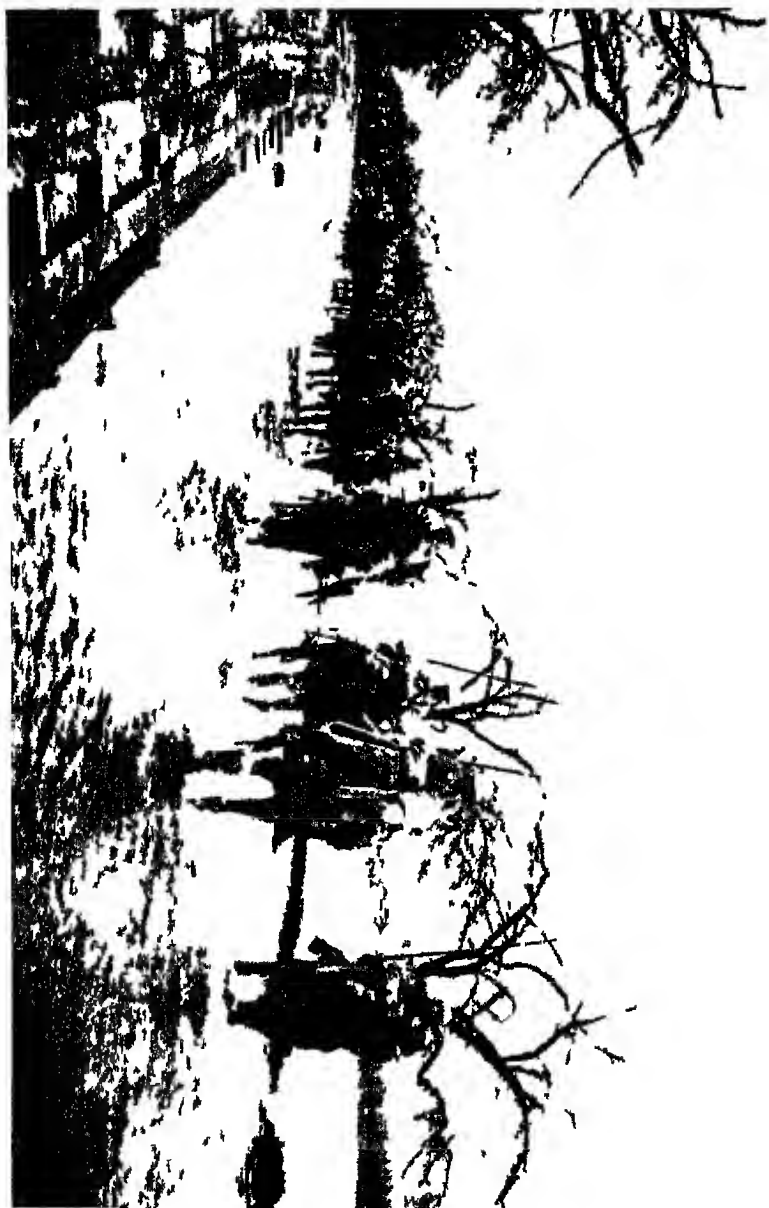
To meet this situation the French created what they called *détachements d'observation et de liaison*, an adaptation to the needs of the moment of an organization which had already been used on the Somme. These comprised artillery officers, runners and telephonists. To them were now added some mounted men. Their usefulness was, however, frequently diminished by the interference of battalion and regimental commanders, who grabbed the artillery

officers and N.C.O.'s and refused to release them. There were demands on all sides for more mounted men. Infantry officers were unanimous in declaring that, when after incomprehensible delays the cavalry did appear on their front, the rate of their progress was doubled. (What that rate can have been before I cannot hazard a guess. It must have been reckoned in perches if not in yards.) It was noticeable that when, as was often the case, the mounted units working ahead of the infantry were unduly weakened, owing to the universal clamour for cavalrymen to carry out liaison and other duties, the advance of the infantry was automatically delayed.

The fact is that during this great forward movement, in accordance with the exasperating and almost constant practice of the war, the mounted arm was mishandled once more, owing to the fact that few commanders understood the use, capacity and limitations of cavalry. Upon this occasion the mounted units were at first held much too far back. When they were ordered forward the main bodies had to cover at least a hundred kilometres, and squadrons and patrols still greater distances, so that both horses and men were very tired by the time they came up with the infantry reserves. Then their real troubles began, for they simply could not get through. When they did it took the 1st Cavalry Division fourteen hours to cover the forty kilometres separating them from the infantry advanced guards. The 3rd Cavalry Division fared better, but even it took eight hours to cover thirty kilometres, and the dismounted regiments of the division, which were transported in lorries, had to be left behind. It became evident, as soon as the congested area was reached, that the mechanically propelled vehicles could not get through, but the cyclist units kept up well with the mounted men.

Space was lacking for any strategic manœuvre by large mounted bodies. It should have been obvious at the outset that the orderly retreat of the enemy over a limited area prohibited any such movements, yet the cavalry were kept together in unwieldy masses, difficult to handle, impossible to supply.

The conclusion I drew, from personal observation as well as from conversations with many officers who took part in the advance, was that had the Higher Command recognized at once that in the special circumstances of the moment the cavalry could only operate as divisional cavalry, and pushed it forward at once with orders to work as such, the advance would have been far more rapid than it was. We know now that this could not have resulted in pinning



FRENCH CAVALRY IN THE FLOODED ZONE



down the enemy and compelling him to fight. His main bodies were over the hills and far away, and we were only dealing with weak rearguards, but these could have been hustled and harried, and they would not have had time to carry out the amount of destruction they actually did, destruction which increased our difficulties and delayed our progress.

It soon became obvious that the question governing all others during the advance was that of traffic control. This broke down completely, and all the energy and ingenuity of the directing Staffs had to be turned on to this baffling problem. The first manifestation of their intervention was the appearance of traffic-control men posted every fifty yards, and there were none too many to enforce march discipline, guide troops round obstacles, and so on.

One conclusion to which everyone concerned with the advance was driven, was that roads over which one's own troops are likely to advance should never be subjected to fire with heavy or medium percussion shells by one's own artillery. Failure to realize this resulted at many points in adding obstacles of our own creation to those devised by the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

It was during the advance that I renewed my acquaintance with a very strange individual whom I had last seen on the Marne.

I was watching a battery of 75's coming into action under cover of what was left of some ruined houses. In less than no time the deadly neat guns were splitting the air and torturing my ear-drums in the excruciating manner peculiar to themselves. With my hands over my ears I went up to the commander I saw some distance away on top of a jagged wall gazing intently through his field-glasses. When he looked down I recognized to my surprise the most peculiar artillery officer I had ever met. During the Battle of the Marne I had come upon him sitting in a tree directing the fire of his guns upon a German artillery column galloping up a road on the opposite hill. Never had I seen better fire direction. Through glasses it was easily possible to see shell after shell bursting amongst the flying horsemen, limbers blown to pieces, guns overturning, struggling horses. Presently all was still on the distant hill. The last German had disappeared over the skyline. All that was left in sight was little black heaps on the far-away road. The 75's ceased firing. The little gunner officer came down from his tree. I went up to him politely, intent on congratulating him on his shooting, but to my amazement

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXIII (page 579).



he did not say a word, nor would he even look at me. He trotted off to a nearby barn and there, together with some of his men, began to work away at erecting what seemed to me to be a sort of altar. That was strange enough, but when I saw him don a vestment I thought I had gone crazy, yet he went solemnly on and celebrated there and then a service for the souls of the Germans he had killed. This done, affable, efficient and businesslike, he told me all I wanted to know concerning the situation in the most precise and military fashion. Seeing I was puzzled, he volunteered the information that he was a priest, but that before taking orders he had been an artillery officer. He had certainly forgotten nothing of his earlier calling.

They were fine men, most of those priests. I remember another who had been a cavalry officer before he was ordained. He was mobilized as a chaplain and attached to an infantry regiment. No man of God ever had a heavier cross to bear, and never can a peaceful avocation have proved more galling to a bellicose spirit. Bearded, furious and immense, his cassock tucked into his belt, he rushed forward whenever his regiment attacked, brandishing his stick as if it were a sword, in the very middle of the front wave, exhorting the men on. On these occasions he indulged himself so far as to swear like a trooper, but these little lapses must certainly have been pardoned him in Heaven, for curbing his fierce patriotism he saved many a German who, but for his intervention, might not in the heat of action have been spared and taken prisoner.

There was a Jesuit father too, whose quiet spirit of self-sacrifice I have always remembered. He had been through the Staff College in earlier days, and was posted to the Staff of a cavalry corps at the outbreak of war. None of his comrades knew that he was a priest, but when in the autumn of 1914 his corps was withdrawn to rest billets he went to see his corps commander, saying simply that he was a priest and did not conceive it to be his duty to be anywhere but in the front line, and asked to be sent back there. His request was granted, and within a fortnight he was killed.

But Catholic priests were not the only ministers of religion who were heroes. I heard a wonderful story of the sublime action of a Rabbi<sup>1</sup>.

In large French formations there were not only a Catholic priest but a Protestant pastor and a Rabbi as well, who generally messed together in perfect amity. I remember dining at such a mess once. The priest and the pastor told me with sly chuckles, while the

<sup>1</sup> This story has already been told by MARY BORDEN in *The Forbidden Zone*.

Rabbi smiled complacently, looking down at his hands folded over his respectably rounded middle, that they had instituted a system of fines for unpunctuality, and that the sum thus acquired had, under the careful administration of the Rabbi, increased to quite respectable proportions.

My story concerns another Rabbi. On the evening after a battle he and a Catholic priest were searching each for men of his own confession whom he might help. The priest found a man left by the stretcher-bearers, too badly wounded to be worth moving, dying alone. He knelt by him and administered the last rites of his Church. Then, taking off the cross that hung round his neck, he held it over the moribund soldier whose eyes were fixed on it. The sun was already hidden behind a distant hill when a shell, perhaps the last one of the day, came over from the enemy's lines. It exploded some distance away, but a fragment whistling and zip-ping through the air hit the priest. He fell dead across the man he had been praying for. The Rabbi saw. He came up, took the cross from the dead man's hand, and held it before the face of the soldier until he too was dead.

A curious feature of the re-occupied area was the German cemeteries. Some of them were beautiful. The one at Cuts, for instance, was dominated by a small but exquisite semi-circular temple in stone. In many others each grave was surmounted by a fine varnished cross with the name of the dead soldier painted in Gothic characters. Sometimes French soldiers' graves had been carefully and reverently made; in other cases a board indicated the spot where both French and Germans had been buried together.

There were other things stranger than cemeteries to be discovered in this depressing booby-trap land. I had been watching, from an observation post overlooking St. Quentin, the fires in the town which were fanned by such a high wind that its whistling under the clear cold sky drowned all other sounds on the battle front; even the explosions of nearby shells were inaudible. On the way back I came upon a very curious installation the Germans had left behind them, which soon became the objective, the *clou*, of the promenades of all distinguished visitors to that part of the line. It was a sylvan retreat, built, so we were told, for the delectation of Prince Eitel Frederick.

• The princely sanctum, a kind of shooting box, looked like any

restaurant in any country resort in Germany. Massive tables cut out of tree-trunks outside the house were surrounded by stools cunningly fashioned to resemble mushrooms. Inside there were hunting trophies and rustic designs in the best German style. One could imagine why the late owners had been unable to bring themselves to destroy a place on which they had lavished such loving care. No doubt they had enjoyed making themselves so very much at home on the soil of France, but what really gave one a shudder was that every living thing within sight of the place, lost though it was in the quiet countryside, had been destroyed with Hun-like ferocity.

A great effort had evidently been made to turn the surrounding country into a waste worthy of the Teutonic prince when he came to take a last look round at the spot where, for all I know, he had spent many pleasant hours.

The burgeoning top of every fruit tree within sight lay severed beside its sawn trunk. Every barn, every hut, every wall had been knocked down, and an attempt had even been made to cut deep into the great woods that closed the horizon on one side; hundreds of trees, lying in dishevelled masses against each other, made it seem as if some giant hand had begun to uproot the forest in an attempt to make a huge zareba, but had desisted in weariness before the task was completed. To add to the depression of the picture, from here also St. Quentin could be seen burning in the distance.

It was in very truth an *Aussichtspunkt*, the ideal spot from which to view the rage of destruction the Germans had indulged in.

As we left I observed a curious device whose purpose has remained a mystery. By the entrance of the lodge there was a double-barrelled pistol aiming down the lane that led past the place. To the trigger was fastened a long wire that lay across the lane. To trip over the wire meant firing the pistol. I do not believe it can have been so arranged when the Germans were in occupation, for it would have shot down harmless civilians as they passed; it must have been a *billet doux* like so many others specially devised to catch unwary soldiers, though this one was far more likely to kill a passing peasant woman.

One very curious consequence of the German retreat was that, the old system of trenches having been abandoned, the whole area was infested by thousands upon thousands of famished rats, who, deprived of their usual food, hopped and ran, enormous and gaunt, in the

open in search of something to eat. They hardly moved out of the way of passing cars which they malevolently watched bumping slowly down the broken roads. At night scores of small red points were often seen as the headlights were reflected in the loathsome creatures' eyes. They were quite unafraid, and it was said, I believe with truth, that it would have been deadly dangerous to fall into some of the old trenches, especially at night. I have no doubt the horrible animals would not have hesitated to attack a man.

Stranger still, I myself saw dozens of cats appear from nowhere, evidently attracted by the rats. They generally sat perched high on any available point of vantage, and I commended their prudence, for it was evident that even a cat would not be safe in the face of so many famished rodents.

Amongst the many beautiful places in the evacuated area that had been sacked and destroyed was a *château*, about whose owner I was told a curious story. He was the Baron d'X, an aristocrat of the old school with a sublime disdain for the bourgeois era in which fate had unkindly decreed he should live. His blood was blue and his pride was great, but this characteristic was the antithesis of the blustering vanity of the parvenu; it was the subtle, impervious pride of the French nobleman which surrounds him, invisible as crystal, intangible as gossamer but tough and resilient as rubber. Sheltered by a moat of good breeding, protected by a high wall of tradition and a barbican of impeccable manners, the Frenchman of this type is invulnerable and therefore exasperating to the middle-class rulers of his own country. If in addition he is capable, as he generally is, of assailing his opponents with shafts of wit the more deadly that, fired with urbanity, they give no opportunity for retaliation, he is formidable indeed. The revolution cut off many heads, but it never devised a means of bridling tongues that seem to have inherited a nimbleness acquired long ago at the court of the old kings.

This particular specimen of a class which, luckily for higher civilization, still flourishes, belonged to the old school to whom the Orléans family were parvenu upstarts, and the Republic a ridiculous phase through which that great lady France was temporarily passing, a feminine whim not to be taken too seriously, something like a love affair, a *passade*, with an inferior.

We were told that when the Germans first advanced in 1914 the Baron refused to have his habits upset by the fact that a battle was

raging in the vicinity. The château was at one time in no-man's-land. Shells flew above it, but still Monsieur d'X carried on the routine of his day, insisting upon dinner being served as usual, the meal graced by the presence of his two daughters in full evening dress. The din outside made conversation difficult, but no matter. The ritual was performed exactly as usual, save for one incident which caused the Baron real annoyance. A particularly loud detonation near by caused the ancient servitor to spill some soup.

Hardly had this contretemps been forgotten when the butler burst in with a precipitation well calculated to exasperate his master, crying—'*Monsieur le Baron*, there are German soldiers in the courtyard.' 'Show them the way to the cellar,' said the Baron, 'and please do not rush into the room like that again.'

There is one miserable memory that darkens the whole of this period as far as I am concerned: the recollection of no battlefield is as ghastly.

The French military censorship, careful to verify whether the Germans had not planted a few spies in the abandoned territory, opened all letters written by civilians in the reoccupied area. I was shown some of these, and amongst them were perhaps the most heart-breaking human documents that have ever been written.

All the letters I saw asked for news. All contained despairing inquiries. They were written to men who very likely were long since dead. It was horrible to see those missives sent in quest of someone, something, that might perhaps now be nothing more than a few rags and bones rattling somewhere on the barbed wire extending from Flanders to the Jura Mountains. Lumps rose in our throats as we thought of the long-drawn-out suspense of the writers, a suspense no one will ever describe and few will ever realize.

The worst of these letters, those that wrung one's heart with an agony of sympathy I have never felt before or since, were sent by some of the women to their husbands or their lovers. Those I am thinking of were confessions to men or to ghosts, the writers knew not which, agonized attempts to explain something that was very hard to explain, very difficult for unskilled pcns to put into words. Many tears had fallen on those sheets of paper, for the wretched writers were torn between the most awful conflicting emotions, longing to see the loved one again, yet agonized by fear of him, in dread of killing his love or seeing it turned to hatred. They must have known

that a ghost might pardon and understand, but that a living man never could.

The stories were always the same, though the details and the circumstances of each were different.

They told of how, from want, because the children were hungry, to provide medicine for a sick baby or to save an invalid mother from starvation, the girl or the wife had lived with a German officer or N.C.O., with men their men were fighting, with soldiers who had perhaps killed them or who might do so yet.

The men they had slept with were anonymous figures, creatures you felt the wretched women were trying to tear out of their minds, to obliterate from their memories, but could not until pardon came. This was true of all but one, who stated simply that the enemy soldier had been kind and had over a long period protected her children from hunger.

Sometimes there was a child by the stranger, playing with the others now, and you felt the unhappy mother did not dare say, could not explain, that she loved this one also.

The letters nearly always ended on a despairing note of appeal. Will you understand, Jean, or Gaston, or Paul? Will you pardon, Pierre, or Emile, or Jules? Will you bear with the child? Can you love me still, who have loved you always?

And the censors who closed the envelopes and reluctantly sent them on their way prayed that the Jeans and Pauls and Pierres to whom they were addressed were dead, so that they would not have to carry this thing with them until a German bullet found them, or, worse still, carry it in their hearts through the years to come. And I, the Englishman, the spectator, thanked God that my country had not been invaded.

Those terrible letters, scrawled many of them on sheets of common paper torn from copybooks, represented a sum of human misery that I do not think can often have been surpassed. No physical suffering I saw or heard of during the war equalled or even approached that raw agony.

## NIVELLE'S FEARS

As the days passed, even the significance of the German retreat paled in importance as a new danger was observed arising in the east and advancing upon us with giant strides. By the beginning of the second fortnight in March the news from Russia, which had been disquieting, became alarming. The shock was all the more severe since the distinguished members of the Inter-Allied Mission who had recently returned from Petrograd had failed to perceive the smouldering embers so soon to burst into flames.

Military feeling had been dead against the revolutionary movement from the beginning, but certain Radical Ministers both French and British were inclined to welcome it. As a member of the French Cabinet put it to an officer who listened to him with gaping mouth and eyes round with astonishment — 'Are you not delighted to see the wing of Liberty caressing the brow of a great people?' It was not given to all to be so poetical; but in talking thus politicians of the Left were merely being logical. Having inveighed against Czarism before the war, they believed or at least hoped that a better, a democratic Russia would emerge from the turmoil. It may be that in a deeper sense they were right, though they did not themselves realize why or how. The war was a struggle of contending moral forces. Czarism and Prussian militarism had a common basic philosophy in their opposition to democracy for which the Western Powers were fighting. The fall of the one, although in opposition to the other, brought about the collapse of both, for according to Ludendorff Germany's decline dated from the revolution she had done so much to engineer.

Monsieur Painlevé had been amongst those who thought that democratic ideals, sweeping over the immensity of Russia, would carry before them and disperse the intolerable miasmas of official Muscovite inefficiency and corruption. But when his military advisers depicted to him the appalling results that would flow from the collapse of the Eastern Front, he was thoroughly alarmed. The ugly genii emerging from the muddled, half-savage, semi-oriental mind of the newly class-conscious moujik terrified him. He now

shared the point of view of the soldiers, whose anxiety for the future was not long allayed by the appointment (on March 18th) of the Grand Duke Nicholas to the supreme command of the Russian Armies. The Grand Duke, constantly pressed to co-operate vigorously in the great Allied offensive, procrastinated just as his predecessor had done, justifying delay on grounds of climate, lack of organization and paucity of material of all kinds. It began to be generally realized that the Russian nation, filled with dull despair, devoured by corruption and intrigue, was incapable of any consistent effort, and that German and Austrian divisions, released from the Eastern Front by the growing Russian lethargy, could and probably would be concentrated against the Italians, to deal them such a blow as might send them hurtling out of the war. At best there was little more to hope for than that the Russians would detain on their front part of the enemy forces.

We had missed our opportunity, thrown away our cards, and made the enemy a present of the one thing he needed—time: so Fate who had begun at last to smile upon the Allies, as if out of patience with them for playing their hand so badly, turned from them and began to lavish her favours upon the enemy. As usual she was proving herself to be an unerring punter, backing the right horse every time, favouring the one with the best jockey, while causing the badly ridden and unfit to be bumped, bored and otherwise impeded.

We were again too late, too late in understanding Russia's plight, as we had been too late in coming to her help with weapons and munitions of war.

In vain Monsieur Painlevé cajoled, implored and threatened his Russian opposite number. He could not realize the depths of the abyss down which his old ally was rolling, nor that she was even now beyond help or advice. So advice he continued to give:

The French Republic was born of a struggle against invasion, he telegraphed hopefully; and again:

Liberty to French Republicans has always meant self-discipline. The Republic is order freely accepted for the good of all.

Then, as alarming reports began to pour in concerning acts of insubordination amongst the troops, he became more pressing:

Even the most advanced French Socialists have always



considered it indispensable to maintain military discipline in face of the enemy.

And in despair, on hearing that the Russian soldiers were electing their officers, he reminded his Muscovite colleagues that the practice had been tried and soon discontinued during the French Revolution.

It was of no avail. The very next day came news that the soldiers' committees would not even accept the right of veto offered them in the case of a certain number of officers' posts.

In these circumstances, when on the 21st General Nivelle also intervened, telegraphing that 'attack is a sound method of distracting the attention of the soldiers from the growing revolutionary movement', his advice must have seemed to the distracted recipients a little old-fashioned and out of date. Comfortable French bourgeois republicans were now in fact confronted with revolution in real earnest. They were almost as disturbed as if their own Revolution that they were so proud of had stepped out of history books and come to life. The Carmagnole, for so long a pretty, lilting ditty, seemed to swell and roar once more into the terrible song the drunken blood-stained mob had yelled as they danced round the lacerated victims of the September Massacres. True, Russia was a long way off, but even in the days before telegrams and wireless the French Revolution had flown over frontiers and sped past armies. If the immense Empire of the Czars sank in red chaos against the crimson eastern sky, who could tell what tidal wave might not sweep over the storm-lashed Europe that lay between it and them?

In Italy the growing malaise was voiced by General Cadorna in his own Italian way. Wishing to see how events were shaping, he suggested that the general offensive should be put off till May 'to allow the Russians time to recover and launch their attack simultaneously with that on the Western Front'. Anxiously he asked that the possibility of sending reinforcements to Italy should be studied forthwith.<sup>1</sup>

As for Roumania, her situation was tragic. Typhus had broken out in the army. There was little meat and no fat for the troops. The Russians pressed the Roumanian Government to withdraw their army into Russia, but this suggestion was strongly opposed by both King and Ministers, who felt that however desperate their situation it would become hopeless if they abandoned their last foothold on their national soil. They had suffered abominably at

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXIV (page 582).

the hands of the Imperial Army they now saw disintegrating before their eyes, and knew the fate that awaited them as the guests of Holy Russia.

The ominous rumblings from the east almost drowned the annoying mosquito-like buzzing warfare between French and British G.H.Q.'s. An end had been put to open hostilities by the London Conference, but there was still a certain amount of surreptitious sniping, of which, so it still seems to me after the passage of a good many years, the Grand Quartier Général was mainly guilty. These bloodless skirmishes went on until events forced Nivelle to rely in an ever-increasing measure upon Haig, and to understand that he could count upon the perfect loyalty of the Englishman.

In both France and England the Press was still labouring to give the illusion that the German withdrawal was a Franco-British victory. War correspondents vied with each other in describing the advance as if it were the hunt of the season, exclamation marks adorning their prose like so many view halloos. Newspaper-readers in London clubs and Paris cafés may have believed them, but their rhapsodies did not take in any of those engaged in that slow chase; they at least realized they were on a very cold scent indeed.

The Third Bureau of the G.Q.G. itself, whose confidence had been greatly shaken by the German retreat, was wondering, in view of the terrible difficulties the organization of the attack would now obviously encounter, difficulties increased tenfold by the abominable weather conditions, whether the offensive should be at any rate postponed if not rehandled. Things went so far that, according to M. Painlevé, Colonel Renouard, Head of the Bureau, wrote a letter to the Commander-in-Chief disclaiming any responsibility for the operation. Such was the importance of this document, M. Painlevé avers, that when General Nivelle gave up his command, Colonel d'Alenson caused this letter to be torn out of the file of the Third Bureau in which it was kept: this allegation has not, I think, been contradicted.

Colonel Renouard had been the trusted Head of the Third Bureau for a long period and was a man of outstanding intelligence and character. His letter might well have made a considerable impression on anyone but General Nivelle, whom it affected not at all. Renouard had much less personal intercourse with the present Commander-in-Chief than he had had with Joffre.

Gone were the days when he had watched with affectionate impatience Papa Joffre unscrew the top of that most precious possession, his fountain pen, as if he were about to sign the document submitted to him, then hesitate, read it through again, the pen moving exasperatingly up and down — would he sign or would he not? Nowadays d'Alenson, the morose giant, stalked into the Operations section and laid down the law in the name of General Nivelle. The *Chef de Cabinet* was dominating the G.Q.G. more and more these days. He had in fact assumed the self-imposed task of infusing enthusiasm into the generals and Staffs who were to take part in the offensive.

He had lost his popularity, and no wonder; but the growing atmosphere of doubt only made him cling more tenaciously to his dream of a headlong offensive. His grip grew rougher and rougher. It was easy to detect whether he had had a hand in drawing up a letter or an order, for through his style there always pierced a note of arrogance. He gave the impression of domineering, and some of the recipients of the missives he inspired thought they even perceived a note of insolence in the haughty sentences he was believed to have penned.

He did not hesitate to write direct to generals commanding Armies without any reference to the Group Commander. In one case, having seen the orders issued by the Fifth Army in Pétain's Group concerning the movements of his force beyond the German lines, he wrote curtly to the Army Commander without deigning to inform Pétain, telling him that his orders lacked boldness and must be remodelled. The Army Commander's crime consisted in basing his instructions on the progress that might be made by neighbouring Armies.

But for all d'Alenson's insane optimism, it was by now obvious even to the Commander-in-Chief himself that the plan for the offensive must be modified in the light of recent developments. It came therefore as no surprise to us at the G.A.N. when a conference of Group Commanders was summoned to meet at Beauvais on March 19th to consider the situation. Sir Douglas Haig was invited to be present.

General d'Esperey ordered the head of his Third Bureau, Major Dufour, and myself to attend, but when we got there we were not admitted to the sanctum where the generals met and had to cool our heels outside. This was frankly exasperating when there was so much

to do elsewhere. Dufour especially, with the heavy responsibility for the movements of two advancing Armies on his shoulders, found the waste of time very trying.

I met a friend sitting like myself on the wrong side of the door, an officer belonging to the personnel of the *Cabinet du Ministre*, that is on the Minister for War's personal staff, who was waiting to deliver a message to the Commander-in-Chief. He gave us the Paris news. The reports from Russia were, he said, of the gloomiest. The Czar had abdicated on the 16th in favour of his brother who had not accepted the Crown. A Provisional Government had been formed. The revolution was gaining ground. There was very little chance indeed of the Russian Army being capable of making any military effort worth speaking of before June or July. The new French Government considered that Briand had been wise to realize that the paralysis of the Russian Army must lead to that of the Roumanian Army also, and that it was therefore hopeless for Sarrail to undertake any active operations at Salonika. He told us something of what was afoot in the French capital, the point of view of his chief, of this statesman and the other, the reason why Monsieur So and So supported or opposed Monsieur Such and Such, until we felt slightly sick and greatly bewildered in our attempts to follow him along the perplexing and dizzy road of high politics.

While we were being given an inkling into the craft of statesmanship, General Nivelle, we were told afterwards, had opened the conference by explaining to the assembled generals the position as it appeared to him. Some indication of his frame of mind may be gathered from the fact that on the previous day he had told the Liaison Officer to the President of the Republic that Hindenburg could not have given him greater satisfaction if the manoeuvre he was carrying out had been suggested by Nivelle himself.

He gave the conference the latest information from Russia and told them how much General Cadorna's attitude worried him. That General was advancing every possible reason for postponing his attack and was withdrawing guns from Gorizia, where he was to have taken the offensive, and sending them to the Trentino where he said he feared an attack, although climatic conditions precluded such a possibility for several weeks to come. He also said that he might require twenty French divisions to come to his rescue in case of need. This, declared General Nivelle, was absurd. Five or six at most could be spared for such an emergency. He would write to the

Italian Commander-in-Chief pointing out to him that the safety of the Allies depended on an early offensive.

He also dealt with the enemy's withdrawal. This might, he admitted, partially upset the plan of operations for 1917, but only one counter-stroke was open to the Allies—to attack as soon as possible.

General Nivelle spoke with force and conviction. He impressed his hearers. He explained in some detail the alterations he was introducing into his plans as a result of the German withdrawal. The G.A.N. was to be progressively reduced until, by the time the Hindenburg Line was reached, it would only comprise a single Army of three corps.<sup>1</sup> Still persuaded that the Hindenburg Line was far from complete and in places only sketched out on the ground, General Nivelle told Franchet d'Esperey that he was to hold himself in readiness to launch an *attaque brusquée*, a surprise attack, between the Oise and the Somme; this operation was only to begin on his express orders. Whether it would take place or not would largely depend upon what occurred on the G.A.R. front. Should the enemy retire beyond the Hindenburg Line, General d'Esperey was to pursue him on the front St. Quentin—La Fère.<sup>2</sup>

Nothing was to be altered in the plan of the G.A.R., which was to attack as soon as possible, at latest on April 8th.

General Pétain's G.A.C. was to support this attack, as had been previously laid down, by an offensive of his left-hand Army, the Fourth, between Nauroy and Auberive. This was to be reinforced by artillery from the G.A.N. and perhaps by two infantry divisions also taken from this Group.<sup>3</sup>

With a view to exploiting in an easterly direction the success he anticipated, General Nivelle said he was considering the creation of an Army Detachment comprising some of the larger formations of the G.A.R., which would be placed under General Pétain's orders so as to ensure unity of command in this part of the field. If the enemy showed any signs of withdrawal on any part of the G.A.R. front, he was to be immediately attacked and followed by whatever troops were then available.

I do not know whether it was then or later that General Pétain suggested that the reserves made available from the G.A.N. should be given to him to attack astride the Suippe, sixteen miles east of

<sup>1</sup> By the time the withdrawals from the G.A.N. were completed on March 22nd, 11 infantry divisions, 2 cavalry divisions and 550 heavy guns were at Nivelle's disposal.

<sup>2</sup> See Map on page 452.

<sup>3</sup> See Map facing page 514.

Reims. No operation could have been better calculated to embarrass the enemy, for it would have forced him to scatter his vital and not too numerous reserves. As, however, General Pétain could not be ready to attack until May, the proposal was set aside.

Sir Douglas Haig, when it came to his turn to speak, explained that his First and Third Armies were to attack on the front Arras-Vimy with their total strength. Their aim would be to break through the German defensive system, outflank the Hindenburg Line on the north and operate in the direction of Cambrai. The reserves of the First Army were to be used either to exploit any success in the direction of Douai, thus covering the flank of the Third Army, or to support the Third Army should it make a considerable advance. The Fourth and Fifth Armies were to exert as strong pressure as possible on the enemy on their front. The Fifth Army was in addition to support the Third Army's main attack by advancing sufficiently far to occupy artillery positions enfilading from the south the German positions south of the Scarpe. The Fourth Army was to co-operate with the French First Army on its right.<sup>1</sup>

General Nivelle's comment was that he thought it probable that the Germans were going to evacuate the Vimy Ridge, and General Henry Wilson, who had been installed as Head of the British Mission on the previous day, when asked for his advice inclined to the same opinion, but Sir Douglas was convinced of the contrary. He expressed his point of view but did not, we were told, do himself justice. It was not the sort of situation he dealt with easily. Stubbornly he developed the reasons which gave him the absolute conviction that the enemy would not willingly abandon the very hinge of his defensive system in the north. With a politeness through which pierced considerable scepticism, General Nivelle alluded to the strength of the German position at Vimy and the difficulty of conquering that formidable height if the enemy did not abandon it voluntarily, but Sir Douglas countered by declaring that just because the Germans thought it impregnable, as indeed it had proved to be so far, they would be unlikely to expect more than a demonstration in that quarter. He closed the discussion by declaring in a tone discouraging to argument that British troops with the adequate material now available could capture it, and he was confident they would.

There was a certain amount of sparring concerning the rate of advance of the British Fourth Army. The doctrine of plunge and

<sup>1</sup> See Map facing page 610.

dash which imbued the Grand Quartier would not allow them to admit that the slow-moving British were keeping up with the French. The British soldiers pointed out to General Nivelle that General d'Esperey, who after all was chiefly concerned, had not made any complaint, and in fact it would have been astonishing if he had, for the British Fourth Army was in line with the French Third Army. General d'Esperey agreed. It was evident, however, that the real feat performed by General Rawlinson's weak and over-extended divisions was not appreciated. The snail-like progress of their own troops had evidently not been observed by the French directing staff.

The question of an eventual British attack in the Ypres sector was also raised by the French Commander-in-Chief. What was its objective exactly? How many divisions would it require? How long would it take to prepare? Could it be launched in any season?

Sir Douglas explained that the object of this offensive would be in the first place to force the enemy to evacuate Ostend, then to clear the Belgian coast, and eventually to free Belgium. The offensive, if decided upon, would take place on the front of the Second Army and would extend from Messines to Steenstraet; 35 to 40 divisions would be required, and given normal weather conditions it would take two months to prepare.<sup>1</sup>

The question of a possible German landing on the coast was also discussed, and it was decided to leave this to be studied by General Wilson in conjunction with the G.A.N., under whose orders the French troops in the Nieuport sector were placed.<sup>2</sup>

General Nivelle, dominated by the idea that the Germans might escape him, said that in spite of the haste being made in the preparation of the attacks the enemy would have full liberty of action until

<sup>1</sup> Sir Douglas Haig wrote a few days later confirming the outline of this operation he had given at the conference. This letter showed how far we now were from the Calais Conference. The British Commander-in-Chief took the opportunity of reminding General Nivelle that the British Armies were only under his command for the present offensive. 'If I should undertake these operations in Flanders I should of course be glad to know under what conditions your Armies would co-operate.'

<sup>2</sup> On the question of a possible German landing behind our lines being studied, G.H.Q. thought it possible the Germans might gain control of the sea along the coast for at least five or six hours, which would enable them to land several thousand men to the west of the mouth of the Yser. It was considered that such an operation was only likely to be undertaken by the enemy in conjunction with an attack on the Nieuport sector, which was under French control. This led General Nivelle to pay considerable attention to the coast defences, which could not be neglected, for a slight advance there would have given the enemy control of the system regulating the inundations that protected the Belgian Army.

these were launched. They might refuse battle by withdrawing either in Champagne or on the Aisne. This was inevitable in present circumstances but must never happen again. To ensure that in future the enemy should not be able to avoid attack by withdrawing he intended preparing zones of attack so that offensives could be rapidly launched in areas where the Germans would not willingly abandon any ground. He considered that Upper Alsace, Lorraine and Verdun offered the best prospect from this point of view. In consequence he was, he said, about to issue orders to General Foch to study the extension of the zone of attack in course of preparation in Upper Alsace. This wider operation was to have as its objective the rupture of the German front about Altkirch, followed by a strategical exploitation to the Rhine. Should this operation materialize, some forty divisions were to be devoted to it.

General Pétain was told to study two operations to be carried out under similar circumstances, one to the north towards Stenay and Montmédy, the other to the north-east in the direction of Spincourt and Longwy, which would threaten the industrial region of Briey.

(When General Pétain's reports were received, General Nivelle decided that, should the original scheme have to be abandoned, the Briey plan was, of the two, the one he preferred. It was to be calculated on the basis of a forty-division attack.)

Throughout the discussions one point in particular emerged. Before the German retreat General Nivelle had desired to space the different attacks at intervals of several days; he now tended, under pressure of fear that the Germans would escape him, to make them coincide. But not a word did he say that gave the least inkling of the gnawing doubts and apprehensions of his Third Bureau, which had actually prepared a note on the situation concluding that, owing to the difficulties the Sixth Army (Mangin's) on the left of the G.A.R. was likely to encounter on the Chemin des Dames, the attack there should be abandoned in favour of one in Champagne, to be carried out by two armies of the G.A.N. in conjunction with an offensive in either Woevre or Lorraine.

General Nivelle's obsession was now a further retreat by the Germans. He began to cling to the idea with the same obstinacy with which he had refused to believe that they were withdrawing from the salient.

This *volte face* had come about almost overnight, when d'Esperey's men had found nothing but empty trenches facing them. Had he



fallen under the spell of his own *communiqués*? Did he believe the enemy dared not face the instigator of the 'Verdun method'? I do not know; but I am persuaded that, as I have already said, his refusal to accept the evidence of the German withdrawal can have had but one cause, his reluctance to admit that his plan was thwarted, and his inability to provide a new and adequate alternative.

His denial of the retreat and subsequent belief in its continuance sprang perhaps from a common cause, an unavowed sense of inward inadequacy to deal with baffling events, a lack of strength that sought to disguise itself as unshakable and unalterable firmness. Perhaps he clung to the hope that all would be well because the alternative was bleak failure.

These factors, and the additional one that General Nivelle was the prisoner of countless assertions and undertakings, all to the effect that he could and would break through the German defences, account, I think, for an attitude that would otherwise be inexplicable.

The great men when they emerged from the conference seemed in quite a good temper, all save General Micheler. The British contingent was seen off by General Nivelle and there was much saluting. To the civilian observer nothing can be more like one military salute than another: the stiff movement appears to be always the same, mechanical as the jerk of signals greeting a passing train; but to the careful observer the military leave-takings of the war could be full of meaning. Sometimes the hand raised smartly to the cap conveyed a message of utter devotion and confidence, but it could also conceal a whole world of dislike, fear or mistrust. In such cases the arm moving upwards acted as the very clamp of military discipline, driving strong emotion deep down out of sight under the lid of a blank expression produced by stiffened muscles commanded by long habits of self-control.

Upon this occasion the bows and touchings of caps gave the impression of relaxation, almost of friendliness.

General Micheler caught sight of me standing in a small group and with a friendly gesture of greeting beckoned me to him. I was unfeignedly glad to see him. He was charming as always, but seemed preoccupied. He touched on a number of subjects, springing from one to the other like the grasshopper he was. Generally he was extremely direct, but to-day I felt he was not disclosing his whole thought, although I had the impression there was something he

wanted to say. Whatever it was he never said it. There was no reason why he should have confided in me, but I had become used to his coming straight out with whatever was uppermost in his mind, and I felt the difference.

Just as he was about to go he said suddenly — 'So the Germans have decided to lose the war by Christmas, and meanwhile as a friendly gesture are handing back whole Departments to us?' He spoke with bitter irony. 'How will the German withdrawal affect your attack, *mon Général*?' I asked him. 'Heu, heu,' he said, but the irony was gone from his voice. He stepped into his car and turning towards me said in his former tone, but with added sarcasm — '*Tout* General is full of confidence and boldness.' The car was moving. I saluted, and I never knew if he meant Sir Douglas Haig or General d'Esperey.

General Henry Wilson told me to remain at Beauvais as he wished to see me, so Dufour returned to Clermont alone. He was very cross, as well he might be. His annoyance had almost, but not quite, ruffled his composure.

Dufour was an extremely able, well-mannered and efficient officer, as handsome and well-turned-out as he was capable, which is saying a great deal. Why do I remember him as so handsome? I can hardly say; his auburn hair brushed well back from his broad bumpy forehead, his irregular features, strong chin and short moustache were ordinary enough, and he wore glasses. It must have been the way he held himself, his expression, but above all his piercing, luminous and superlatively intelligent light-coloured eyes that were so attractive. They were framed and not dimmed by his glasses.

General Wilson only wanted information concerning the G.A.N. and details of how the liaison was carried out, and he gave me more news himself than he could possibly have obtained from me. His mind took kangaroo-like bounds from one subject to another. Amongst other things he told me that General Nivelle had greatly resented Sir Douglas's postscript to the convention drawn up in London, but had not let anything of his annoyance appear that day. He also told me that General Nivelle and his Staff said they were completely indifferent to the fall of Briand. This struck me as strange. Perhaps they were bluffing. If not they must have been blind indeed, for this ungrateful attitude towards Nivelle's champion was not only ungracious; it was short-sighted. Obviously the eclipse

of Briand was bound to affect profoundly the position of the Commander-in-Chief.

General Wilson said he was determined to make things run more smoothly between the two General Headquarters. It seemed to me that he had already achieved some success in this direction.

The next day, and many others, I spent wandering about the desolate region vacated by the enemy, sometimes in search of the cavalry, at others hunting for an artillery formation, or endeavouring to locate a Staff, but always labouring to improve liaison. It was weary, depressing work, for we had obviously failed to pin the enemy down, and it was inexpressibly bitter to move about helplessly amid so much destruction, under a mercilessly dark sky swept by high winds driving snow and sleet alternately across the desolate landscape.

Often on these missions that were at times real adventures I was accompanied by Captain Altmayer, a French cavalryman on the Staff of the G.A.N. He was a stern, tall, thin individual with blue eyes and a cadaverous face, a Don Quixote in blue.

We became used to meeting and surmounting the most incredible and ever-recurring obstacles in this snare-infested land, and the fact that we generally reached our destination was mainly due to Altmayer, who had the strictest sense of duty and whom nothing could deflect from carrying out his orders.

I can see him now, standing in the car and ordering the trembling chauffeur to drive over the slippery uncertain planks bridging some of the chasms that lay in our way. He forced the wretched man to negotiate places I simply should not have dared to order him over in sheer apprehension of his refusing to obey. But no one ever questioned Altmayer's commands. He was the embodiment of will at the service of unquestioned military authority.

When the car fell in, as happened sometimes, Altmayer would run, taking enormous strides with his long, divider-like legs, and return in a wonderfully short time with a gun-team to extricate us.

Upon one occasion, when it was blowing hard, we raced down a long stretch of road where French Territorials were felling the trees that had been half cut through by the Germans. This was essential to prevent their crashing down on passing troops or transport. It was one of the most exciting drives I have ever had; the chauffeur, bent over the wheel, drove for dear life, dodging some shell-holes,





(top) MURDERED TREES  
(bottom) AN OBLITERATED VILLAGE

jumping others, while the tall poplars swayed dangerously and cracked in the gale. At one point two had fallen ahead of us. As we pulled up, another, with a report as of minor artillery, came down behind us. We took to the fields for a while after that.

One of my most vivid memories of the country abandoned by the Germans was that whenever they had had time to do so, trees, especially fruit trees, had been cut down. They lay there, half-severed, the tops covered with tender green leaves pressed into the ground. Those rows of trees, still promising spring although hurt to death, seemed in some strange way to be humbly begging with what life was left in their drooping branches that mankind should not be utterly annihilated although guilty of the crime of war. They seemed to be interceding for a race which, not content with tearing its own kind to pieces, was now turning its bloody, sacrilegious hands against Nature itself.

But these thoughts were not the first impression and only came later, after rage at the sight of those massacred trees had somewhat abated. Dead men did not fill one with anger against the enemy unless they were very dear friends; they inspired only repulsion or sadness; it was just the luck of war, they had tried to kill and been killed instead, that was all: but those trees made us feel as if the soldiers we were following were demoniacs or fiends, made us want to hurt them, to make them suffer for this affront to something we all held sacred. Some primeval instinct had been outraged, an obscure feeling of reverence for the old gods of earth, perhaps; for trees, we now somewhat unexpectedly realized, meant something very important to every one of us: they were not part of the war, the Germans might as well have fouled the sky as they had already desecrated the air with their poison gas.

I remember how difficult it often was to locate our position in the obliterated landscape of the forward areas. Maps in hand, we would search the skyline for village or spire, but they had been destroyed and were now only a word on the printed paper we were looking at. The cartographer who had so carefully noted their positions and in beautiful calligraphy set down their centuries-old names had not guessed he was writing an epitaph.

Sometimes, during the first days of the advance especially, we met small groups of civilians plodding across the fields, trying to escape

the war, turning their backs on homes that had ceased to exist. Sad as had been the sight of the refugees during the Retreat in 1914, these people offered an infinitely more pitiful spectacle. The fleeing population of the early days had generally had something to save, they had their goods and chattels with them, but these people had nothing. The wanderers of 1914 had been driven on by fear, those of 1917 felt only despair. Women, children and old people, they were foodless, shelterless and utterly cowed. Several times I asked these people, thinking of what had been told us at Noyon, whether the young girls had been taken away. Some said that they had, but seemed to think it natural and inevitable.

It was not a pleasant sight to see a free people utterly broken in spirit. Three years of German occupation had reduced their mentality to that of slaves.

## CHAPTER XVI

### SIR DOUGLAS HAIG

THESE were dreary days at the G.A.N. All hope of catching up with the enemy before he reached the Hindenburg Line had been abandoned, and the only question now was how strong that line might be and how soon communications could be re-established to enable us to attack whatever system confronted us.

The weather continued to be abominable. There never had been such a spring. Snow day after day. Even the most unobservant must have wondered how under these conditions the guns leaving the G.A.N. front in endless columns could possibly register in time on their new objectives on the Aisne and in Champagne. Flying and consequently air photography were practically impossible.

Confidence was everywhere diminished. The German retreat had been a rude shock to the Command, and the weather seemed to be conspiring with the enemy to give him the maximum benefit from what had undoubtedly been a very able manoeuvre. Every responsible officer, aware of the difficulties the organization of the attack was encountering, began to wonder whether it could possibly take place with any chance of success unless the weather improved greatly within the next few days.

As for the men, they had concluded by this time that the enemy's withdrawal, which at first had awakened their interest and curiosity, was just one more dirty trick of the Boche. The only result they could see from it was that they were still more uncomfortable and miserable than they had been before. There was no doubt that the weather was beginning to tell on them very unfavourably, especially on the African regiments, who were wilting visibly in the cold. I saw some of them on March 21st. They looked miserable and their stamina was obviously affected.

They were only less unfortunate than their predecessors, those Senegalese giants who had made their first appearance in the trenches in the autumn of 1914, and who had literally died of cold in Artois. The poor wretches had soon begun to suffer from chillblains and from what was, I suppose, trench foot, though that affliction was not, I think, generally known then. It had been dreadful to watch them



using their elbows and hands as much as they could to take the weight off their feet as they dragged themselves about the trenches. Presently the icy mist that trailed over that desolate country paralysed them to such an extent that their white N.C.O's had to load their rifles for them. Thus they endured for a while, frozen and helpless, dutifully holding their weapons in their numbed hands, wondering vaguely no doubt what it was all about, dreaming perhaps of sun-baked plains and little huts where women worked and black babies crawled in the sand; then gradually their numbers diminished, until one day I noticed there were none of them left.

Since those early days the folly of employing Senegalese in the trenches during the winter months had been understood, the waste of human material realized. Great camps had been formed on the Riviera where they were drilled during the cold weather. In the spring, long trains hauled their cargoes of black chattering happy sub-humans to the area where presently the heaviest fighting would take place.

Personally the Senegalese filled me with a mixture of liking, pity and alarm. On the Somme where they had first been employed in massive numbers I had watched them with admiration bathing in the canal, thousands upon thousands of beautiful bronze statues. These same men in uniform looked like dressed-up monkeys, and, to my constant amazement, sweated inordinately on the march even on a cool day. They were armed, in addition to the ordinary equipment, with an enormous knife, some three feet long, broadening out towards the end. This was the *coupe coupe*, their favourite weapon at close quarters and a very unpleasant one. It could easily sever a head at a blow.

One evening in 1916 I met a few of these blacks on the flat ground south of the Somme. They had no white man with them and I was alone. There was no one else in sight. Some fifty feet away they stopped, had a good look at me, then began to move very slowly towards me with a curious stealthy swinging motion. Their lower lips hung loosely and their eyes stared without expression in heads that moved slowly from side to side. I had noticed on previous occasions that when they were angry their heads swayed like those of cobras. When I observed that, without saying a word, each was slowly drawing his *coupe coupe*, I felt considerable alarm. They obviously did not know my uniform and presumably

thought I was a German; the realization that I was totally unable to explain my identity, not knowing a word of their language, impelled me to retire with more speed than dignity. They had thoroughly frightened me, but I doubt if I was as scared as were some German prisoners I once saw in a 'cage' surrounded by Senegalese. The blacks, squatting round the barbed wire, were engaged in sharpening their *coupe coupes* on the soles of their bare feet, now and then interrupting this pleasing occupation to make the significant gesture of slitting a throat. With enormous grins they repeated '*Nach Paris*'. Where and how they had picked up the German expression or what they thought it meant I do not know, but it pleased them enormously. No wonder the prisoners sat huddled together absolutely green with fear. Knowing the tales spread in their army about the black troops, I realized they must have thought their last hour had come. I reassured them and told them they were quite safe, but I don't think they believed me.

Some of the Senegalese were reputed to be cannibals, and I was told that those who had three cuts on their cheeks and filed dog-teeth had a special *penchant* for human flesh. They and the North Africans were the only natives I came across in the war who could stand heavy shell-fire, but they were quite useless without their own officers, and when these became casualties they were apt to become a general nuisance if not a danger. They were very excitable, and if they lost their sense of direction were as liable as not to attack the reserves on their own side, or neighbouring troops. Magnificent fighters, they had unfortunately in times of stress no clear definition in their minds of friend or foe, and recognized as the former only men they knew.

Slow to train owing to the difficulty of language, finding complete novelty in everything they saw, and useless unless the personal touch was constantly maintained, they were difficult to use in prolonged action when their officers melted away as officers always did.

Great hopes were centred on them in 1917, but this spring was worse than most winters. Would the weather change in time to thaw them into activity?

After my visit to 'Mangin's blacks', as they were called, on the 21st, I had a particularly trying return journey across the reoccupied area, and only reached Clermont late at night, wet, chilled and depressed, to find a message ordering me to G.H.Q. Starting off at

once in an open car, I travelled through the icy darkness, arriving at Montreuil in the early morning. When I arrived I was told that Sir Douglas Haig wished to see me later; so, after dealing with routine work and visiting the different offices, I reported myself at his château some little distance from the town.

It was impossible to see Sir Douglas and not be proud of him, not to feel an intimate satisfaction that this handsome young-looking man was head of the British Army. To a cavalry officer especially it was gratifying that one so essentially a cavalryman should be the leader of the greatest force we had ever put into the field.

Of medium height, always well-groomed and well-turned-out, noticeably so even in an army and a branch of the service where the standard in such things was extremely high, he moved well, and his gestures had a grave ease that was natural to him. He carried his well-shaped head forward; it was strongly planted on his square shoulders and this emphasized the obstinacy of his strong chin and jaw. His wide-set, level blue eyes under their straight eyebrows seemed to question a newcomer as if considering whether he was to be trusted or not. To those he knew and liked that clear look could be very friendly and warm, but it took some time to overcome a *défiante* due, I think, to a natural shyness which lay at the core of a powerful character bolstered up by considerable, though not illegitimate, ambition. His voice was not unpleasant, though without modulation; it lacked the free resonance of some voices, and vibrated on one rather muffled note that verged on the metallic and the nasal but was neither.

He was well versed in his profession, with a clear vision over a limited field, but he suffered from the handicap inherent in men who know what they want and see their goal, but are conscious they lack the gift of persuasion. He expressed himself clearly and forcibly on paper. A hesitant speech, ending in silences reinforced by a forward movement of the jaw, giving the impression that obstinacy rather than reason had dictated his decisions, stood him in poor stead when dealing with Ministers. The consciousness of this deficiency in the power of influencing others by the spoken word, this difficulty in expressing an idea clearly, of sensing the rising objection and meeting it before it is even formulated, a gift which some possess to such a superlative degree, made him very shy of politicians except those he knew well and believed to be his friends. In this respect he was exactly like Joffre, who, on paper a master of clear thought and



HAIG



decision, gave the impression of confused thinking before a critical audience.

A natural desire to avoid appearing at a disadvantage, coupled with the determination to achieve his objective, led Haig to employ at times what some considered to be indirect methods, and others, who were unfriendly to him, attributed to a liking for intrigue. Thus the fact that, doubting his own power to convince, he sometimes used intermediaries to convey his views in London, had the inevitable effect of causing him to be misunderstood by many.

His shyness had another disadvantage, especially in his dealings with Allied Commanders, for it led to his preferring to get his impressions through his entourage, and although many of his subordinates, especially now that he had an expanded Staff, were broad-minded and understanding men, there was still a nucleus who fostered their chief's love of seclusion and filtered the very air he breathed.

In the early days of the war the general tendency of the I Corps Staff, then commanded by Haig, was very anti-French, with the result that facts concerning our allies were often presented to Sir Douglas in colours unfavourable to them. Most of these influences had long since disappeared, but enough of the former bias remained to increase difficulties which all the goodwill in the world could not have avoided altogether.

My own personal experience was that when the I Corps was in the Givenchy sector in 1915 I had the greatest possible difficulty in gaining access to Sir Douglas, even when I was the bearer of personal messages from the neighbouring French Army Commander. This was a great pity, for if a liaison officer is employed at all, he must, if he is the bearer of a personal message, deliver it personally to the commander for whom it is meant. Merely to pass it on to another subordinate is to nullify the only point of using a liaison officer, that is to see that the complete inner intention of the sender is fully grasped by the recipient. Otherwise a written message will do just as well and be far more economical of time and effort.

It was sometimes difficult to arrange meetings, even during critical operations, between Sir Douglas and his French colleagues. I have a vivid recollection of the tension, largely due to this cause, that arose, for instance, between him and General d'Urbal, commanding the French Tenth Army. That General, although his command was five times the size of Sir Douglas's, complained that he was treated barely as an equal by his English colleague. I am afraid that this

was so. General de Maud'huy whom he had succeeded, although the most affable and kindly of men, had also found his British neighbour difficult at times, principally because he was so aloof and unapproachable. With d'Urbal relations became very strained in spite of the Frenchman's real endeavour to avoid difficulties, an endeavour the more praiseworthy as it was entirely foreign to his nature.

D'Urbal was an enormous man, as proud as Lucifer and as punctilious in matters of etiquette as an introducer of ambassadors. His Staff called him The Satrap.

I ended by liking this formidable individual who towered in utter loneliness above the scores of thousands of men he commanded. He gave the impression of a potentate carrying on all occasions an invisible steel sceptre with which he smote blows sometimes heavy and sometimes light, but which always left their mark. At the first Battle of Ypres, when his infantry faltered, he put a rolling barrage of 75's behind them that progressed at the pace at which he desired them to advance. At St. Pol he placed under arrest any officer whose coat was not buttoned according to regulations. The bravest thing I ever did was to intercede with him on behalf of a French officer he had met in the street and punished for having a shaven upper lip. I felt bound to do so, for, as I explained, this officer had been wounded in the mouth some months before at La Couture by a shell that had killed his Colonel, De La Croix, and I knew this because I had bandaged the wound with my field dressing. The only result of my intervention was that his punishment was doubled for not having had the presence of mind to state his case himself.

D'Urbal became so exasperated at what he considered Sir Douglas's off-hand methods in dealing with him that, violating both his Olympian reserve and his principles, he complained to me, a junior officer, of the scant courtesy which he declared the British General had shown him. What I found so trying was that I was convinced these occasional strains, which reacted so badly on the operations then in hand, would never have arisen or would at least have been greatly lessened had the two Commanders known each other better, had they for instance entertained each other occasionally at dinner. I cannot recollect their ever having done so.

Strange that difficulties with the French, which in the case of Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, for instance, had a tendency to disappear, were apt where Sir Douglas was concerned to be magnified

and to grow. Curious that this most courteous of gentlemen failed in a relationship where less polished men succeeded.

This was the more incomprehensible in that he had what the French call *panache*, the natural gift of making a brave military show wherever he appeared, a sober chic which appealed to them. Everything about Sir Douglas seemed designed to appeal to the French; his fine appearance, his chivalry, his manners. Aloof he was perhaps, but that was no matter; the French understood and appreciated reserve.

His partial failure in his relations with the French must be largely laid at the door of his entourage, which, quite apart from tendencies already referred to, was also inspired by a natural though unfortunate desire to shield his shyness. This was a great pity, for in an alliance it is a matter of grave moment to get on with your ally, a simple truth that was at times lost sight of by both sides.

I have emphasized this point at some length because I have seen so many advantages accruing to a general simply because he was accessible, so many obstacles disappearing from the path of the man who saw the other's point of view, so much goodwill flowing towards him who treated an allied colleague just as he would one of his own people, with perhaps a touch of extra politeness thrown in, and exactly the reverse happening to those who did not practise these simple courtesies.

I do not wish to be misunderstood, or to give the impression that Sir Douglas was generally unpopular with our ally. It has already been noted that General Joffre had the highest regard for him, and General Nivelle was soon to recognize his sterling worth. When he unbent and spoke with complete frankness, as he did to Monsieur Painlevé when that Minister visited his Headquarters on March 24th, he made a friend for life. The pity of it was that his personal contacts with the French were not frequent enough, and that too many saw in him a distant and rather uncongenial personality, which he certainly was not.

He had a warm heart, and showed great affection for those whom he considered his friends. Although he never used his power to promote his personal friends beyond their deserts, friendship played perhaps too great a part in his decisions, or at least so thought the army at times, for he obviously could not bear to get rid of subordinates whom he had long known, and he fought hard to maintain some of them in their posts in spite of hints and grumbles from London.



If this observation is true, and those who were in close contact with him may hold a different view, it was a serious fault in a Commander-in-Chief, who should tower in complete objectivity over his army, as Joffre did for so long over his.

Yet in spite of Sir Douglas's tendency to shield and protect his friends, Sir William Robertson told me long after the war that he could be very caustic and critical of those who served under him. If this was so, and I naturally saw no signs of it, it established a great difference between the two generals. That old bulldog Wully would break a subordinate without a qualm, but so long as that subordinate held his post and he was therefore responsible for him, he would neither criticize him to others nor allow such criticism to be uttered in his presence.

Seen at the angle from which I saw him, Sir Douglas was a loyal friend to the extreme point where personal friendship and affection may impinge on the highest interests of the service, and Wully's judgment may have carried a slight bias, for when later he played his last card and resigned, he felt in his heart that Haig should have resigned also, standing by him as he had stood by Haig.

The Commander-in-Chief received me in a large room with windows on three sides. On wide trestle tables many maps were spread out. A relief map of the Vimy Ridge, showing up all the features of those treacherous blood-soaked slopes, had a table of its own.

To my surprise and inward pride Sir Douglas at once began to speak of highly confidential matters. I felt myself growing in my boots, for not only was he kindly and courteous, he was always that to a young subordinate, but he spoke to me as if I was a person of importance. I felt I was being promoted, as indeed I was, for there was I, a very young major, being told the whole story of the Calais Conference by the Commander-in-Chief himself.

Sir Douglas was extraordinarily detached and calm, and not in the least bitter or resentful against anyone. His conclusion was that the whole thing had been a grave mistake, and that had any attempt been made to carry out the French suggestions there would have been a mutiny in the British Army. And with this quiet statement I silently agreed from the bottom of my heart.

It was evident from what Sir Douglas said that he did not, and in any case could not, allow himself to believe that General Nivelle was

in any way responsible either for the elaboration of the proposals put forward at Calais, or for the way in which he had been kept in ignorance of them.

All this had been a monologue, for I said not a word. I was too ignorant of the facts and too awed to have an opinion. Sir Douglas may have thought I was in a position to confirm what he said. He would perhaps have been pleased had I been able to quote General d'Esperey or some other high French military authority to prove that the soldiers at least had had nothing to do with the intrigue, but of this I am not certain, for he only stopped and looked at me occasionally as if to give me a chance to speak had I been so minded, but when I remained silent went on talking very slowly in that hesitating, whirring voice of his as if he was thinking aloud.

Presently Sir Douglas began to speak of the German retreat on the G.A.N. front, and asked me General d'Esperey's opinion on whether the movement was likely to continue, or whether he thought the enemy would fight on the Hindenburg Line. To these questions I was, to my relief, able to give an answer. He also said, and this gave me intense pleasure, that it was my reports that had confirmed him in the opinion that the Germans intended retiring on a big scale. He added that a message I had sent asserting that they were actually going south of Péronne was the first positive news of the movement in that area he had received.

Sir Douglas then spoke to me about the liaison between the French and British War Offices. He said it was very bad, that the principle was unsound. The channel of communication was the military attachés, whose chiefs were their respective ambassadors. To use them involved informing the Embassies and the Foreign Offices of all military plans. This meant that in practice commanders in the field were very reluctant to inform the War Offices of forthcoming operations. Sir Douglas said that of course he withheld nothing from General Robertson personally, but they were both afraid of Paris, where it seemed that not only were there the most extraordinary leakages but our representatives relied on the oddest means of gathering information.

I told him that there was no question of secrecy as far as the forthcoming operations were concerned. He said he knew this and deplored it. Why was it? he asked. I could only answer that no charge of responsibility for the leakage could be brought against anyone in particular, for the simple reason that everyone knew about

the great offensive because it was General Nivelle's policy that they should. For the sake of exalting morale the men had been told that they were to take part in one great final victorious battle. The zones of attack were common knowledge in the army, and of course men on leave told all their friends and relations.

The contrast between these methods and those of Joffre, who often completely isolated units that were to take part in an operation, arose I think in both our minds.

Sir Douglas then, brushing aside the possibility of the Germans abandoning the Vimy Ridge, said he believed they meant to use the divisions they had recovered by their retreat in an attack on the British front between Armentières and the sea. 'They could not possibly do that if they cleared out of Vimy.'

This was not the opinion of the ablest French Intelligence officers, I told him. Their views, which were not welcomed at the Grand Quartier, were as follows.

What do we know? That the enemy is reinforcing himself opposite the exact spot where the main attacks are to be launched. That is about all we do know. The information we have concerning the Hindenburg Line is contradictory and cannot be relied on; but the amount of work the Germans are putting in opposite the points of attack seems to show they have a pretty shrewd idea of the weight behind the blow they are making ready to withstand. It also shows that they have no intention of withdrawing further. If they mean to fight on the Aisne they cannot abandon the Vimy Ridge. To do so would be like barricading the front door and leaving the back one open.

There were good brains in the French Army, I told the Commander-in-Chief, who, although they did not broadcast their views, said plainly that the logical explanation of the steps taken by the Germans was that they knew and understood General Nivelle's plans. Every one of the French moves had been countered. The central attack to be delivered by the G.A.N. had been quite simply negatived, washed out, rendered impossible, by the neat expedient of the retreat. The Germans had compelled General Nivelle either to change his original conception or to attack positions which were naturally immensely strong, and which they were sparing no effort to render well-nigh impregnable. How could they abandon the Chemin des Dames, the very hinge of their defensive system? As for the extra garrison for the positions they were

apparently intent on defending at all costs, these were provided by the troops they had recovered by retiring and shortening their line.

I told Sir Douglas that I had discussed with my French friends the possibility, suggested by reports from our own army, that the enemy might have in mind a serious attack against us in the north, but that in their opinion it would be very unlikely the Germans to make such a mistake. They had not the troops available for both a major attack and a defensive battle on a big scale. To assume that they had such a second-class operation in mind presupposed that they underestimated, perhaps fatally, the weight of General Nivelle's forthcoming blow, and this was improbable. They seemed never to make that kind of error, and everything tended to prove that they were particularly wide awake just now. If the Intelligence reports indicated that there were any German preparations in the north, then in all probability these were intended as a feint and nothing more.

Changing the subject, Sir Douglas asked me what General d'Esperey thought of the possibility of an attempt being made by the Austro-German forces to deliver an attack against Italy. I gathered he did not think such a contingency very likely, but that on the other hand he believed a terrific blow at Russia to be very probable. Sir Douglas then went over the whole field of the war, for the purpose, I supposed, of my telling General d'Esperey his views. He believed that Austria was really in a parlous condition, and that this time the news that she was on the verge of collapse was not merely the expression of the exuberant hopes of Intelligence officers. Turkey too was on her last legs. The capture of Kut el Amara on January 25th and of Baghdad on March 11th had been deadly blows. Sir Douglas believed the Germans would probably feel compelled to make a big effort on behalf of their allies in the east.<sup>1</sup>

When he had finished speaking, the Commander-in-Chief remained for a long time standing, looking at a large map spread out on a table on which his hand rested. When he spoke again it was to direct me to keep in as close touch as possible with the Intelligence of the G.A.R. and to give particular attention to the German preparations, accumulation of reserves, etc., on that front.

<sup>1</sup> What in fact occurred was that, very reluctantly, the Germans sent von Falkenhayn to Turkey's help, with a few German battalions, consoling themselves with the thought that by suffering Turkish resistance they would probably succeed in compelling the British to send to this distant front a far greater number of troops than they were themselves dispatching.

When he dismissed me, I had a talk with General Kiggell, the C.G.S., and had a great success with him thanks to a little scene I had witnessed a few days before, the description of which made him laugh loud and long.

I had happened to walk into a French brigade headquarters installed insalubriously in the cellar of a demolished house into which neither light nor air penetrated. A German counter-attack had just been announced on the telephone, and by the flickering light of a candle I could see the brigade major excitedly shouting instructions down the curious old-fashioned instrument, whose earpiece and mouthpiece were separate contraptions. He was trying at the same time to tell his brigade commander, a little, unshaven, bristling man who had a look of the late Monsieur Delcassé, and on whose nose a pince-nez, stuck at an angle of 45 degrees, trembled with the emotion of its owner, what the regiment concerned was reporting. The brigadier, putting his head close to that of his subordinate in an endeavour to hear, also began to shout instructions into the instrument; this evidently not working, he snatched the mouthpiece, the major still clinging to the listening apparatus. A moment later the general grabbed at this also, but the major neatly countered by regaining possession of the mouthpiece, down which he yelled an unfinished sentence. This game of grab went for on a while, honours fairly evenly divided, the shadows of the participants forming incongruous patterns on the curved uneven wall.

'Who won?' asked General Kiggell. 'The Germans', I answered.

Little anecdotes such as this were a godsend to me, for, being by definition a messenger of evil tidings, the eternal conveyor of remonstrances which ran down the full gamut of reproach from mere expostulation to ill-disguised obloquy, I found it was a saving grace to be able to introduce a little comic relief into my repertory of complaints.

I became a diligent collector of salacious stories for soured Staffs, and a close observer of these same Staffs and their little weaknesses for the benefit and relaxation of regimental officers. As it turned out, the conscious effort involved in trying to look on the comic side of things was of no small help to me in preventing the recrimination and sarcasm with which I was often favoured from permanently embittering me.

Before leaving Montreuil, I learnt something of the impressions

Generals Davidson and Birch had gathered during a recent visit to the G.A.R.

One fact had struck them particularly. If there was one thing upon which the Grand Quartier Général insisted it was the shortage of rolling stock. The controversy on the subject has already been alluded to. Yet the two generals had seen in the French zone of attack such a plethora of trains as to cause serious congestion. More trucks were being run into the area than could be unloaded. They had observed at many level crossings which were for ever closed, causing great road congestion, hundreds of wagons following each other head to tail in endless procession.

They had seen General Mangin, and found him very sceptical concerning our attack on Vimy. They had also spoken to many commanders, and it had been borne in upon them that the lower they went, the nearer to the troops, the less was the enthusiasm for the offensive. Ardour evaporated and apprehension grew, the nearer they got to the formidable lines opposite.

These observations certainly confirmed my own, but it was lucky for me that I had said nothing on that score to the Commander-in-Chief, and had confined myself to exposing the objective point of view of some particularly well-qualified Intelligence officers, for I heard afterwards that General Davidson had had his head snapped off for telling Sir Douglas of this impression. The Commander-in-Chief was determined that nothing should be said that was in the least likely to diminish faith in the French success. Having made up his mind to help General Nivelle as much as he could, he would not allow amongst his own Staff anything savouring of criticism or doubt as to the success of the enormous effort about to be made. He was of course perfectly right. The merest hint of doubt on his part would not only have been completely out of place and absolutely useless, but would have laid him open to strong criticism. He could only do his utmost to play his own part successfully, and pray for French success.

When I left Montreuil I was depressed. As was frequently the case after reporting to an important personage, I doubted my judgment in retrospect, wondered whether I might not have been mistaken and have given a wrong impression of some points, for by now I knew how small things, a word or even a gesture, could influence a decision, sometimes with the gravest results. This

feeling of gloom was deepened by the fact that it was snowing. It was heart-breaking, this unbelievable weather. It seemed as if the gods of the north had collected all the hail, rain, snow and mists from East Prussia and Pomerania to hurl at us in their endeavour to help the field-grey hordes.

Returning via Beauvais, I dined with General Henry Wilson and his officers. He was in splendid form. He had a post that suited him admirably, great power and no responsibility, and he had around him an appreciative audience of particularly clever men.

As he ate he held forth, his immense gaunt frame leaning over the table, his arms revolving like windmills. Seizing objects here and there, he transformed the table into a map. With his deep voice and cavernous chuckles he explained; the fork was the Fourth Army, the spoon, the spoon would do for d'Esperey, no the big spoon would be Micheler, the salt cellar Cambrai, the mustard pot Arras. He was amusing himself enormously; his dark, ugly, mysteriously furrowed face was animated; from his big twisted mouth words flowed continuously, persuasively, eloquently.

The Boche was cunning, full of guile, he would avoid Nivelle's deadly thrust on the Aisne. Here the big spoon waved in the air ladling emptiness. The Boche was going back to the Meuse. He would hang on there while he concentrated all his might against Russia. The Meuse! How often had I heard General Wilson, during the preceding years, say that the Germans were going back to the river I remembered so well from 1914. Namur on its cliff, Givet, high wooded slopes bathed in sunshine, Uhlans on the skyline beyond Dinant — it all came back with a thrill of pleasure and of hope. Movement, open warfare once more. But we were not allowed to dwell on the idea. Without any transition General Wilson started a dissertation on when the century begins. His argument was full of quips and jokes as with neat little phrases he revived a controversy in which the Kaiser himself had taken part seventeen years earlier.

But as I drove back to Clermont I was not thinking of whether the century began in 1900 or 1901, but of whether General Wilson was right about the Germans. Did he reflect the point of view of General Nivelle? Did the French Commander-in-Chief really believe the Germans would not wait to withstand his blow? If so the chasm that existed between himself and his lieutenants was deep and wide indeed.

## CHAPTER XVII

### PROBLEMS OF THE GERMAN WITHDRAWAL

THE period we were about to enter was full of contradictions, cross-currents, hesitations and doubts. Intense malaise prevailed. Like men in a canoe racing with broken paddles towards rapids, we eddied and swirled; sometimes part of the crew held back desperately; at others it looked as if the dangerous waters would be faced bow on and negotiated victoriously; at others again the contrary seemed to be the case. The craft rocked, went sideways, seemed about to capsize, but, whatever the action of the crew, always, inexorably, time drew the boat downstream towards the cataclysm of the enormous offensive.

It is strange to think on what uncertain foundations that offensive rested. The concrete gun-emplacements we had built, the tunnels we had dug, the railway lines we had laid, depended on a plan that rested on shifting sands.

In military operations as in other things, the intangible thought and will have more substance than material objects. Mind is the reality, steel and machinery the shadows. The commander's plan, guns and tanks weighing tons, stand in the same relation to each other as the dream does to the dreamer. The terrible apparatus of war can only play its formidable part if called to life by the impalpable resolution of the directing brain.

General Nivelle had the will. He never lacked resolution, but a false conception, growing opposition and the blind antagonism of natural forces thwarted and dimmed his purpose.

At Clermont we felt something was very wrong. The Commander-in-Chief's grip did not relax, but his objective seemed to show a growing tendency to escape him, as if he were endeavouring to clutch an eel in his tightening hand.

During these days General d'Esperey did not say much, and I had to draw my own conclusions, but he was evidently worried by the turn events were taking. His apprehension increased when, after a conference of Group Commanders held at Beauvais on March 26th, General Nivelle gave him to understand that he was



worried about the Commander of the G.A.R. The enormous armaments and the vast number of troops placed at Micheler's disposal had been given him mainly because of his enthusiasm for General Nivelle's plan. This, even more than the confidence he proclaimed in success if sufficient forces were placed at his disposal, had caused the Commander-in-Chief to cast him for the chief rôle in the attacks. But, said General Nivelle, now that he was being called upon to fulfil his vehement undertakings he was fighting shy.

At the conference itself, which was also attended by Generals Mangin and Wilson, together with a number of officers of lower rank, much was said and little decided. D'Esperey, essentially a man of action, spoke little. He detested councils of war. General Micheler was very vague. He evidently felt uncomfortable and in a false position.

Some significant silences proclaimed more eloquently than words could have done, so I was told, the growing divergence of view between d'Alenson and his chief on the one hand, and Colonel Renouard and the Third Bureau on the other.

General d'Esperey came back from the conference more perplexed than ever, for General Nivelle was now as anxious to urge him on against the Hindenburg Line as he had been determined to hold him back when he faced empty trenches. He was ordered to be ready to pounce on the enemy as soon as the Commander-in-Chief gave the word, and to launch a surprise attack (*attaque brusquée*) at any moment on the new German positions between the Somme and the Oise. But the Commander of the G.A.N., watching the increasing difficulties his troops were encountering in their advance, was beginning to suspect that the Hindenburg Line was a far more serious obstacle than he had at first been inclined to think. Moreover, to carry out the order he would in the first place have to obtain observation, which meant gaining possession of the high ground south of St. Quentin extending from Dallon to Urvillers and known as the Épine de Dallon. He would also have to move the greater part of the artillery east of the St. Quentin Canal. To do this it was necessary to organize a protective position strong enough to resist all attack, since a successful counter-thrust by the enemy in this quarter would be very dangerous on account of the enormous amount of material accumulating in the area. He had endeavoured to make this clear to the Commander-in-Chief at the conference without any apparent result. But on the following day, March

27th, General Nivelle abandoned the idea of an *attaque brusquée* by the G.A.N. and decided that it should attack on April 10th, two days after the British and two days before the G.A.R. The initial day J was to be that of the British attack; the G.A.N. was to attack on J plus 2, the G.A.R. on J plus 4, and the G.A.C. on J plus 5. J was to remain April 8th unless the weather conditions were hopelessly unfavourable.

On the same day General Nivelle wrote to Sir Douglas giving him this information. He added that 'to render more complete and to facilitate the success of the G.A.R.', as great a proportion as possible of the German reserves should be drawn to the Hindenburg Line; to achieve this it was essential that the attack of the G.A.N. on the front La Fère—St. Quentin should not appear to be isolated. This could only be avoided if the British Fourth Army carried out a powerful artillery action, leading the enemy to believe that an attack on this front was intended.

'I trust that you will be good enough to give orders that this artillery action should be carried out by all the means at the disposal of that Army, and also that its infantry be in readiness to co-ordinate its movements with those of the French left, so as to be able to take advantage of any fresh withdrawal.'

General Micheler also was informed on the 27th that the general axis of his advance should be directly to the north towards Guise, Vervins and Hirson, in modification of his instructions of February 9th, which laid down that it should be inclined westwards. (This modification was due to the German retreat, which had brought the G.A.N. to the outskirts of St. Quentin and confined the British attacks to the neighbourhood of Arras.)

The change in General Nivelle's plan and the abandonment of the idea of an *attaque brusquée* did not give General d'Esperey much comfort. He did not think it was possible in the time available to launch his attack on the main German positions. He believed that at best he might be able to seize the southern suburbs of St. Quentin. With the utmost frankness, a frankness which unfortunately was not generally practised, he laid his views before the Commander-in-Chief in writing.

The enemy's position facing the Third Army formed, he wrote, a *courtine* (curtain) flanked to the west by the bastion of St. Quentin, and to the east by the heights on the left bank of the Oise.

These defences had no great depth at the moment, but they ran along reverse slopes, and were protected by extremely strong wire-entanglements so placed as to render their destruction by artillery fire very difficult. The German guns were concealed in the numerous buildings of St. Quentin and its suburbs and were difficult to locate. Furthermore the enemy had excellent observation. The numerous factory chimneys and the cathedral towers dominated the countryside as far as La Fère. The opposite was true of the French, who, for the moment, had neither view nor points of observation. They would remain deprived of these until they had fought their way on to the high ground lying between them and the Hindenburg Line. Furthermore the German aircraft, now operating in flights of six planes, made air reconnaissance and observation on behalf of the artillery extremely difficult. We were anything but masters of the air.

General d'Esperey's conclusion was that to attempt to carry out the prescribed attack on April 10th would mean, should the enemy hold his ground, hurling the French infantry against uncut wire flanked by superior artillery. Such an attack was bound to be a costly failure if it was launched before the G.A.R. had advanced sufficiently far north of Laon to threaten the German guns facing the G.A.N. All he could possibly hope to do, he wrote, was to gain observation and then attack the German forward defences at St. Quentin. In other words he could carry out a diversion and pin down some of the enemy's forces in front of him. He could not hope to help General Micheler further, except that his guns could enfilade some of the German positions facing the left of the G.A.R. His long-range guns on railway mountings were even now in a position to do this.

General d'Esperey's courage and frankness were rewarded, for General Nivelle accepted this point of view. It was settled that the Third Army should attack the forward defences of St. Quentin on the 10th and be prepared to assault the Hindenburg Line between St. Quentin and the Oise to the south on a front of some six miles on the 13th. General Mangin's Sixth Army was to co-operate in this action. It was presumed that by this time General Micheler would be in hot pursuit of the enemy on his front. To Franchet d'Esperey's operation was later added an attack immediately south of La Fère. This, if successful, would be of the utmost value to General Mangin's Sixth Army, whose immediate opponents would

then have French troops behind their right flank, north of the St. Quentin hills and forests.

Meanwhile the G.A.N. was being rapidly deflated. Troops, guns, everything seemed to be streaming southwards.

Never in all the war had such immense masses of guns and tractors moved at once. They advanced in two columns, each forty-five kilometres long, so that a man standing at one point could have watched for two whole days the rattling, jangling, lumbering guns, tractors and munition-waggons bumping their immense weight along roads that gave way under the stupendous flood of steel, until their surface became uneven and rough like a river bed under torrential waters. The spectacle was terrific. I had never seen and hope never again to see anything like it. Guns of every kind jolted by, enormous mastodons behind creaking tractors which made some of the old-fashioned horse-drawn guns look like medieval toys. It was as if all the guns since artillery was invented were taking part in a gigantic parade. Nothing so colossal or so varied could, one felt, have been the work of a single generation.

In spite of its grandeur, it was a depressing sight, which filled one with gloomy forebodings. We knew the length of time it took artillery to prepare emplacements, munition dumps and roads. We were aware of how long the gunners needed to become familiar with the immensely complicated trench system on our own side, not to mention that of the enemy. Realizing also that a long series of fine days was necessary to enable the guns to register on their objectives, it seemed to us impossible that these guns only now on their way could be in position in time to take a useful part in the battle.

These thoughts were much in my mind, and one day I spoke of them to one of our G.H.Q. officers. He answered, shrugging his shoulders, that General Nivelle did not seem to attach much importance to mere preparations, for he had written to Sir Douglas in January that 'it was always possible to begin military operations and to pursue their development simultaneously, whether the preparatory work was embryonic as at the beginning of the Battle of Verdun, or three-quarters finished as when the Battle of the Somme opened'. Personally I gathered little comfort from this quotation.

Most of my time was now spent with the French Third Army, which had taken over the whole front of the G.A.N., the First Army having been withdrawn.

The advance of this Army immediately on the right of our Fourth Army was a matter of considerable moment to us, since it governed the extent of our progress on this part of the front. Further, as the French Higher Command constantly suspected us of hanging back, it was important to ascertain exactly how far and how fast their Third Army was getting on.

As a matter of fact its advance was desperately slow, with every prospect of stopping altogether as soon as the Hindenburg Line was reached.<sup>1</sup>

The weather continued to be atrocious, and the troops, without cover or shelter, suffered abominably. The 25th was fine, but there was heavy snow and rain on the 26th, which changed to snow and hail on the 27th. On the 29th there were storms of sleet. It poured on the 30th, and on April 4th it snowed again. I noted this as 'the worst day there ever was'.

During the whole of this period it was quite impossible for the artillery to do any good work, and the airmen could see nothing.

The repair of the railway progressed but slowly, in spite of an innovation that greatly upset the railway sappers. Their conventions were outraged by the introduction of a new system which consisted in pushing gangs of men ahead in motor lorries to repair the lines at several points at once. If the shade of Vauban had been insulted the engineers could not have been more scandalized. Who had ever heard of repairing a line except by mending each section as you came up to it?

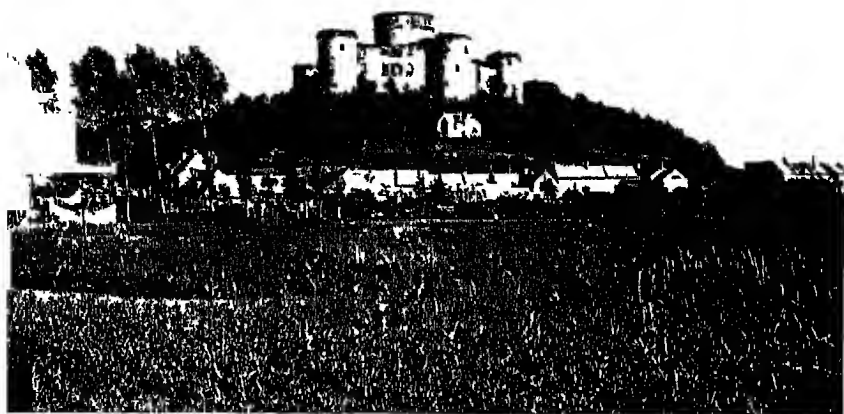
But the sappers had other and graver things to contend with than inroads upon their prejudices. Do what they would they found it impossible to locate all the German long-delay mines on the railway-tracks and elsewhere, in spite of the most diligent search. Explosions continued until the middle of April, making both railway travel and work on the lines a nerve-racking ordeal.

During this period I gained considerable solace from observing that the German troops appeared to be as bad at open warfare as the French. In counter-attacks they manoeuvred clumsily and

<sup>1</sup> On the 21st the French cavalry were held up on the Crozat Canal but Tergnier was occupied. The cavalry were withdrawn, for the river passages were held by enemy infantry covered by powerful artillery. It was not until the 22nd that the Third Army crossed this obstacle, not without difficulty, however, for the enemy launched frequent and violent counter-attacks.

In spite of all endeavours it was not expected that the railway to Noyon would be open until the 30th or that to Roye until April 1st. As for that to Chauny, it was not expected to be working till April 7th. See Map on page 452.





COUCY-LE-CHÂTEAU  
BEFORE AND AFTER THE GERMAN RETREAT

in heavy formations. Their men appeared to be as unprepared for work in the open, and their junior officers as green and uninstructed, as were those on our own side. I well remember on March 22nd seeing a German battalion attacking near a place called Liez. They came on gallantly enough, the Germans were rarely deficient in courage, but the whole lot, the entire line, converged upon a small wood that lay on their front. They obeyed the instinct to take cover, and knowledge backed by discipline was absent to point out the danger. Three groups of 75's and one of 55's (forty-eight guns) were turned on to that wood together, and in a few moments it was an inferno of flames, smoke and flying timber. After that bombardment not a single man was observed either advancing or retiring from it. If there were wounded they must have perished there.

The high ground about Coucy-le-Château south of the Oise now assumed very great importance, partly because it commanded observation towards the Massif of St. Gobain, but especially because it was the vital bulwark protecting the enormous deployment of Mangin's artillery immediately to the south of it.

It was odd to find oneself in that country again and to approach from the opposite side villages and natural features we had known so well in 1914. The names alone were familiar, for the places were as unrecognizable as photographs held upside down. Many of them, such as Vauxaillon and the neighbouring villages not two miles south of the Oise Canal, which we could see from Coucy, had played an important part when, after the Battle of Guise, the French Fifth Army had narrowly escaped being cut off by the German cavalry on August 31st, 1914.

My duties often took me to Coucy, and every time I conjured up the picture of the exhausted columns streaming south of Laon just over the hill fifteen miles away, so weary and footsore that nothing could hasten their pace, although their own lives and the fate of their country depended upon their speed.

Even seen as we had seen it during the retreat, when there was little time or inclination to admire historical monuments, the magnificent and proud pile of Coucy-le-Château had made a deep impression on all the weary souls who stumbled past its ancient walls. Every time I looked at it I felt fresh anger at the vandalism that had led the Germans to blow up and destroy what had certainly been one of the finest ruins in the world. They had been far more thorough



and cruel than the centuries. The enormous grey walls were bleeding white from many breaches, for the inner stones were as white as on the day Coucy had been built. Great cascades of stone had poured down the slopes on which the château stood, and lay like a chalky glacier exposing what had been concealed for so long. It must have taken vast quantities of explosives to disembowel those mighty ramparts, but neither explosives nor labour had been spared to carry out the destruction. It seemed that not only was the enemy bent on destroying the present, the houses in which men lived, and God's gifts of fruit and harvest, but was determined to wreck the past as well. In destroying Coucy he had raised his iconoclastic hand against history, torn out a page on which the story of the Middle Ages was written more clearly than in a library of many books, and had in his folly deprived humanity of something that could not be replaced, just as the barbarians had desecrated, but with more excuse, for they knew no better, the beauty of Ancient Greece which they were incapable of perceiving.

Je suis ni roi, ni prince, aussi,  
Je suis le Sire de Coucy,

hummed my companion, and the superb, the insanely proud motto of the old Lords of Coucy has remained jingling in my memory to this day.

During my wanderings I came across enormous concrete platforms concealed in the woods, on which had stood the guns that had fired at a range of thirty-five kilometres against Compiègne, Fismes and Villers Cotterets. These seemed gigantic. Little did we dream that even then guns of twice the range were being built to bombard Paris itself.

A characteristic of the country on the slopes of the St. Gobain hills, to which the French had now advanced, was the innumerable deep caves which provided perfect protection from artillery fire. These *creutes* were old quarries, some of them dating back to Roman times. They had provided the stone from which most of the towns in the Aisne valley and indeed part of Paris had been built. Quarried no longer, many of them were used by the inhabitants in pre-war days to grow mushrooms in, or as general storehouses.

Our allies took immediate advantage of them, but one could not help thinking that the Germans also must be enjoying the protection

of similar caves on their own side of the line. How on earth could artillery have any effect on troops thus sheltered? Gas alone could dislodge them. Inquiry from those who knew the country increased my doubts. The hills right down to the Aisne were honeycombed with *creutes*. I had never heard the word before, but it was soon to be impressed on my mind in such a manner that I shall not forget it as long as I live.

On the 28th an officer I knew, then at the Ministry of War in Paris, gave me news that greatly interested me. Monsieur Painlevé, an admirer of things English, was, it appeared, anxious to create a post similar to that of our Chief of the Imperial General Staff. The functions of the Chief of Staff at the French War Office, although hardly comparable, were little more important than those of our Military Secretary. In the Minister's opinion it was the lack of a technical adviser that had involved the last Government in some of its most obvious dilemmas. The feeling that the Cabinet needed a technician in its councils had led to General Lyautey's appointment, with the result that there had been a conflict of authority which no one wished to see repeated.

Monsieur Painlevé, quite properly, had asked General Nivelle's opinion on the matter. My amazement was great when I was told that the Commander-in-Chief had raised no serious objection to the creation of a post that might easily overshadow his own, and I said so. 'You are wrong,' said my informant. 'The Commander-in-Chief told the Minister that he considered the idea of a generalissimo to be a dream that would never materialize. It was, he said, impossible to control the Russians, and the Italians would never accept foreign direction.' 'Then what about the English?' I asked. 'Oh,' said the man from Paris, 'you have, you see, already accepted General Nivelle's supremacy. He told the Minister that the one question he considered vital was that his authority over the Western Front should be unchallenged. He was certain no difficulties would be raised on that score because your people trust him.'

I have no note of any reply I made to this, but I thought quite a lot.

Curious to understand what the relationship between the holder of the new post and General Nivelle would be, I plied my informant with questions. 'Does not the Commander-in-Chief realize that if Pétain is appointed Chief of the General Staff he will become the effective Commander of the French Army?' I asked. I was told that

General Nivelle had made it perfectly clear that he would insist upon the powers of the new post being so defined that he could not possibly be interfered with. He had, it seemed, told the Minister that, as he would readily understand, the new Chief of Staff would not exercise any authority over the Allied armies; it would therefore be manifestly absurd to think that he could in any way control the French Commander-in-Chief. General Nivelle had laid it down definitely that the French Army must lie outside the scope of the new appointment.

The officer from Paris certainly did not realize how infuriating this point of view was to me. Here was Nivelle refusing to consider a plan of reorganization if it implied the least loss of his authority over his command, on the ground that neither Italians nor Russians would tolerate foreign interference: yet the British Army, if not the largest certainly the strongest and most efficient force on the Allied side, was assumed to have lost its identity to such an extent, to have become so much a part of the French armies, that it need not be considered in any way. It was just a force commanded by General Nivelle, and he was prepared to resist an encroachment by another French general upon his authority over it. We were just part of the Western Front over which he reigned supreme.

I tried not to show my exasperation. After all, General Nivelle's attitude had nothing to do with the friend who was telling me about it as if I were a member of his own army. If we were being treated thus it was the fault of those whom the country in its wisdom had elected to rule over us.

From other things my informant told me, I gathered that according to General Nivelle's conception, the duties of the Chief of the General Staff were to be those of supervising exterior theatres of war such as Salonika. This would relieve him of considerable worry, and of taking over the tiresome and unsatisfactory question of dealing with the Missions accredited to distant allies, such as the much-suffering Roumanians and the deliquescent Russians, while bringing to bear on the Italians political pressure, which was, according to him, the only kind to which they responded.

The impression I gathered was that General Nivelle on the whole welcomed the appointment of someone who would relieve him of uncongenial work and allow him to concentrate upon the command of the Anglo-French forces in France. It was quite obvious, however, that if he ever suspected that in the soil of the new office the seed

that might produce a future generalissimo was germinating, he would immediately trample it down.

As my friend left he told me that the Czar and his family were under arrest and were now to be known as the Romanoff family.

On thinking over this conversation I concluded that much of it must have been mere gossip, an imaginative interpretation of very tentative conversations or messages exchanged between the new Minister and General Nivelle, but later M. Painlevé assured me that it gave a true picture of his negotiations with the Commander-in-Chief at the time, and for that reason I have noted it here.

During the last days of the month General Nivelle was again seized with panic lest the Germans should escape, and on the 31st his obsession was reinforced by the Intelligence section. They reported that some fires had been observed behind the German lines in the Lens area, and that a prisoner, captured by the British, said he had heard his officers say that their troops would have to retire under enemy pressure to the Drocourt-Quéant Line. Finally, and most convincing of all, a small balloon was picked up, wafted over, it was believed, from the occupied territory behind the German lines, which carried this message: 'A large army corps dying of hunger is falling back from Lille to Tournai.' It was signed by a woman who said her husband was in the French Army.

In consequence General Nivelle informed the Group Commanders on April 1st that there were signs of a withdrawal on the British front, and that in that event the date of the British attack, and consequently that of the French Armies, might be advanced.

General d'Esperey immediately asked General Humbert, commanding the Third Army, to hasten his preparations still further and, after consulting him, telegraphed to the Commander-in-Chief that he could launch his attack if given a minimum of four days' warning.

This was an optimistic forecast. The Third Army had first, as has been seen, to gain observation, so on April 1st strong reconnaissances were sent out against the Dallon spur. These failed to gain a footing anywhere in the German lines. On the other hand the British Fourth Army, which attacked in co-operation and in perfect liaison with the French, did capture its objectives, the woods about Savy, and found its right very much in the air owing to the failure of its allies.

That same day Monsieur Poincaré was visiting the reoccupied areas in both the French and British zones. His tour was a great success. The little bearded President with the close-set eyes, who looked like a ferret and moved like a robin, was greeted by bands playing the Marseillaise. Taking off his chauffeur's hat he made precise orations meant to be soul-stirring but which only sounded like implacably logical indictments of Germany.

What civilians there were wagged their heads approvingly, evidently thinking the Boche was getting no more than he deserved, but at the same time they seemed to think the President very brave to utter so loudly in his high metallic voice such things about the arrogant, ruthless conquerors before whom they had trembled for so long. They looked a little frightened, as if they feared the Germans might hear him. Nevertheless they cheered him politely and discreetly, but on the whole they seemed relieved when he went, and followed with envious eyes his big car with the tricolour pennant on which his initials, R.P., were embroidered in letters of gold, as it sped away to those regions that knew not war. He at least would be over the hills and far away if the Germans happened to come back suddenly.

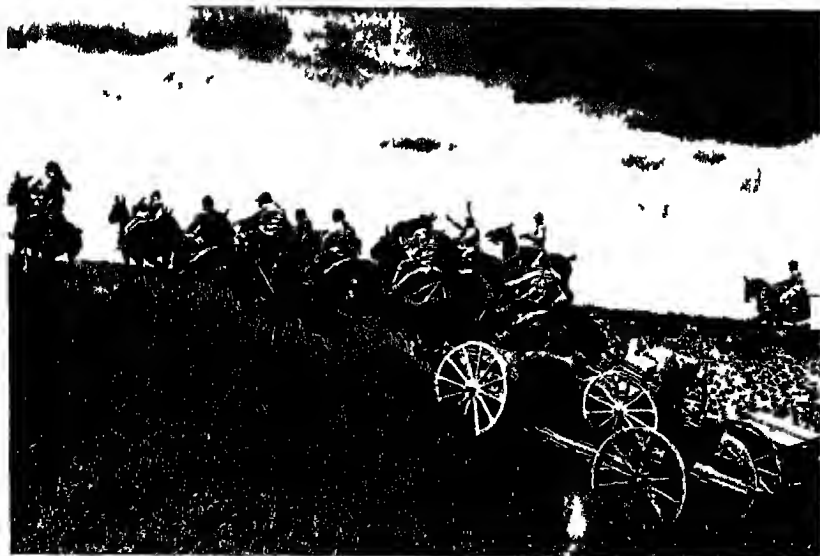
In the British zone the bands also played the Marseillaise, and, no doubt out of respect, made it sound as much like God Save the King as possible. The troops cheered the President's orations more lustily than had the French civilians, not having understood a word of them. His choice, clear-cut, lego-patriotic phrases, which had taken such elegant flight high above the heads of the French peasants, were completely beyond the somewhat restricted limits of the language our men fondly imagined to be French, a vernacular of at most twenty words grouped round such key phrases as 'vingblong', 'nong', 'napoo', 'bong' and 'parleyvoo'.

During his visit to the British, the President was bent on more serious matters than mere ceremonial functions. He took the opportunity, as he had been primed to do, to urge the British generals he met to 'keep up with the French, maintain close touch with them and attack when they do'.

In view of what was occurring at that moment on the front of the Fourth Army, this exhortation was not without irony.

On the following day, April 2nd, any doubts that might have lingered in the minds of anyone at the G.A.N. concerning the intentions of the Germans disappeared. They had evidently not the





(top) FRENCH TROOPS ENTERING LASSIGNY  
(bottom) FRENCH 75'S CHANGING POSITION

faintest intention of retiring on a big scale. This was proved by the complete failure of a determined French attack carried out on Dallon. Next day the assault was renewed. This time the Germans evacuated some tactical points: these were occupied and some progress was made here and there, but in the main the French were held up again, though not for long; they were doggedly determined to gain their objectives. The bombardment of the German positions continued all night, and next morning, the 4th, at dawn, the French infantry rushed forward in a snowstorm. By 2 p.m. all their objectives were held.

The troops attacked with such gallantry that the impression of weariness they had lately given me vanished. I felt I must have been wrong, that well as I thought I knew them I had been deceived by these brave men, who, if their sodden haversacks were empty of food, never found their hearts empty of courage.

These attacks, which I witnessed, had a kind of grim horror of their own. The cold was intense, supplies were lacking, and everyone was wet to the skin. As the first dirty light appeared in the sky, the air was filled with long, vibrating, hissing wires of steel projected all round and about us. The machine-gun bullets seemed to encage each individual so closely that he dared not move, dared not even lie down.

It takes no great effort of memory to recall that horrible dawn. I remember standing rigid, paralysed with fear, unable to stir. Away in the fog and snow the continuous loud crackle of the spitting machine-guns sounded like dozens of sparking batteries. I felt as if, already projected into eternity, I had started on the long, bewildering, lonely journey through infinite space where cosmic forces hurl the rushing stars on their endless way.

Presently there was a lull. At my feet I saw, till then invisible in the darkness, what had been four wounded men. They must have dragged themselves there, and some guns, probably changing positions at a trot in the night, had passed over them, driving their mangled remains deep into the mud and red snow.

While this attack was taking place, the British Fourth Army had made a corresponding advance, but for tactical reasons and because of the strong resistance put up by the enemy against his centre, General Rawlinson decided not to close in on the Hindenburg Line to the north of St. Quentin until the French had penetrated into the town.



The liaison arrangements between the two Armies were functioning extremely well, and General d'Esperey was highly satisfied. Everything had been worked out. Even the co-operation of the British and French cavalry beyond the Hindenburg Line, should this be captured, had been arranged for.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### VIMY<sup>1</sup>

THE Allied Armies, like so many troops of strolling players, were now giving the finishing touches to the series of dramas to be put on in April. In the various booths the curtains were still down, or supposed to be, but across the Russian one hung an ominous notice 'No Show', and that concealing the Italian company showed signs of sticking hopelessly. The performance of the G.A.N. had been postponed *sine die*, the German public having rudely moved off before it was ready to begin; there had been nothing for it but to dismantle the shack and move forward after the crowd. At other theatres, though we knew it not, the ill-mannered Germans had peeped behind the scenes and were ready to pelt the actors; but there was one drama we hoped would bring down the house, that of the British attack north of Arras. There preparations had been going steadily forward for months for the biggest performance we had yet staged.

My narrative so far has dealt only indirectly with events on this front, as I was not personally concerned with it, but it is now necessary to give some account of the preparations of the British First and Third Armies for the battle, which I was to follow very closely.

The German retreat had, as has been seen, caused important, indeed fundamental modifications in the British plan. It will be remembered that originally the British part in the spring offensive was to have consisted in an operation designed to follow up the Somme battle by pinching out the salient between the Scarpe and the Ancre, into which the enemy had been pressed as a result of the Somme fighting, but that the advent of General Nivelle had caused drastic changes in this conception. The British had had to extend their front to enable the new Commander-in-Chief to enlarge the scope of the French attacks, and this had led to delay of which the Germans had taken full advantage. To avoid the danger of being cut off in the 'bulge' they had withdrawn to the Hindenburg Line. The front of attack of the British First Army against the Vimy Ridge was unaffected, but the same was not true of the Third Army.

<sup>1</sup> For this chapter, see Map facing page 560.

Although the Germans had not budged an inch in the Vimy sector, on General Allenby's front south of Arras the area to be attacked now included some four or five miles of the enemy's new defensive system. Here the preparations had had to be reorganized in haste and given a new direction. Railheads had to be brought forward and new roads built over ground systematically devastated by the Germans. To find new battery emplacements, move dumps forward and register the guns on new targets, all took valuable time. Our guns were not in fact sufficiently far forward when the battle opened, and this was to prove a severe handicap as the action developed.

The problem of the British south of Arras was further complicated by the fact that their trenches were beyond assaulting distance. No-man's-land had to be gradually narrowed and assault trenches constructed within easy reach of the enemy's front line.

Gough's Fifth Army on the right of the Third was even more severely handicapped. Although still well placed to co-operate with Allenby's attack, for it threatened the rear and flank of the Germans against whom the Third Army was to advance, it laboured under the most formidable practical difficulties. Its front, like the southern front of attack of the Third Army, faced the Hindenburg Line, but it had a far greater stretch of sabotaged country behind it. Nor was this General Gough's only problem. Every available man and gun had been taken from him to strengthen the main attack.

It was in these circumstances that, ordered to co-operate in the offensive, he chose the Bullecourt sector for his action, but lack of guns, men and time compelled him to confine it to a narrow front, a fatal disability.

The German retreat had also profoundly altered the respective rôles of the British and French in the combined offensive. According to General Nivelle's plan, now that the G.A.N.'s operations had been reduced to a shadow, the rôle of drawing German reserves from the main French theatre on the Aisne fell to the British alone. This was all he expected of them. Their front of attack was too far from the Aisne to have any direct effect on General Micheler's operations, and it was no part of the French Commander-in-Chief's calculations that they would break through, nor did he for a moment believe that they would.

On the other hand General Allenby's orders did contemplate such a possibility. If his Army succeeded in piercing the German defences astride the Scarpe, he would be in a position to attack

the Hindenburg Line in rear.<sup>1</sup> From this point of view his front of attack was ideally situated, but the Germans were fully aware of their danger, and to parry it were now busily engaged in digging a powerful switch line, known as the Drocourt-Quéant Line. This, still uncompleted, was clearly visible from the air. It ran north and south some seven miles east of Arras and was an alternative to the northern part of the Hindenburg Line. It was intended to prevent the British rolling up the Hindenburg Line should they break through on the Arras front.

As far as the tactical operation was concerned, Sir Douglas Haig's foresight in including the Vimy Ridge in his objectives was being justified by events. Not only was the possession of this bastion necessary to enable an attack to debouch on the Scarpe, but, as he had made clear at Beauvais on March 19th, he had realized even before the enemy retired that, although they might withdraw elsewhere, they would never abandon the famous heights which commanded the Douai plain. Here they must stand and fight. In the siege operations of the period, to be sure that the enemy would not render all preparations void by retiring was no mean advantage.

The front the British Third and First Armies were to assault was fifteen miles long. It extended from just north of the village of Croisilles south-east of Arras, to just south of Givenchy-en-Gohelle at the northern extremity of the Vimy Ridge. North of Arras the main German trench system had been unchanged for years. Immensely strong, comprising three trench systems made up of no fewer than twelve parallel lines of trenches connected by numerous switches, it had resisted all assaults. There were in addition many specially organized and defended centres of resistance and fortified villages. Behind these ran a powerful switch line extending from Liévin in the north, southwards to Hénin-sur-Cojeul. The defensive belt thus formed was from two to five miles in depth. East of Arras, in addition to villages, strong points and trenches, the marshes of the Scarpe lay ready to break up any attack, and from three to six miles behind the whole front to be assaulted ran the new line of resistance already referred to, the Drocourt-Quéant Line.

The object of the First Army was to secure the flank of the Third by capturing the Vimy Ridge. The principal attack was to be delivered by the latter, whose objective was Cambrai. Breaking

<sup>1</sup> For the following pages, see Map facing page 610.

through north of the Hindenburg Line, it was to take that formidable defensive system in flank and rear. The key position on its front was Monchy-le-Preux, south of the Scarpe, from which splendid, all-round observation could be obtained. If this village and the high ground on which it stood could be captured on the first day of the attack, there was a real possibility of General Allenby's ambitious plan being carried out.

The Third Army's Operation Orders prescribed that every effort should be made to reach the Drocourt-Quéant Line, some eight miles from our front, at the same time as the retreating enemy. Since it was clearly impossible that the attacking infantry could cover this distance after the severe fighting anticipated, the Cavalry Corps was to be used for this purpose. Three cavalry divisions, the 2nd, 3rd and 4th, were therefore placed at General Allenby's disposal; these, with the 17th Infantry Division which was attached to the Cavalry Corps, were to operate south of the Scarpe. The remaining Division of the Cavalry Corps, the 1st, was placed under the orders of the First Army; the 5th Cavalry Division was held in G.H.Q. reserve north of the Scarpe.

The strategic conception of the operation was bold; it aimed at hurling the cavalry at the Germans as they struggled back towards their last defensive line and then making for Cambrai. The tactical plan, on the other hand, was based on the principle of the wearing-down battle, a principle long to survive. There was clearly a lack of harmony between these two conceptions. If it was expected that the enemy would fight hard on every line, as indeed was probable, time must be allowed for the artillery to come up and deal with his machine-guns and cut a way through the wire (it was generally accepted that from their original positions the guns could not do this beyond the second line). On the other hand, if the enemy was expected to be so shattered that on certain sections of the front at least he might be driven from position to position without having time to put up an adequate defence against the solid, piston-like drive of the attack, the rigid pauses contemplated between the attacks on the different defensive lines were unnecessarily long.

The operation, viewed even in the light of those days, had the disadvantage of being a compromise between the new French theory of speed and the old experience based upon bludgeoning a way through. It also lacked elasticity, since no provision was made to enable the infantry to take immediate advantage of a breach

in the German armour if such were revealed as the battle developed. It was hardly enough to have the cavalry ready to dash through, for they could only do so if the German line was actually rent, which was unlikely to happen under the steady pressure of the mechanically regulated advances. Handy reserves immediately available, whose special duty it would be to push through and widen any breach that occurred, would have provided a necessary intermediate link before the cavalry was called upon to act; but this was not part of the plan. Strategically our declared aim was to pierce the German cuirass, but our tactical measures were only calculated to dent it.

The ground over which the First and Third Armies were to advance was well known to me. My acquaintance with it dated from October 1914, when, hanging over the folded hood of an open car, I had driven backwards into Ablain St. Nazaire. We were trying to locate the French cavalry, and no one knew whether they or the Germans held the village. In the latter event we would most likely not have time to turn the car, hence the peculiar manoeuvre. I can see now the face of the chauffeur Johnson, crimson with the effort of craning his neck backwards to watch the road, and his expression when we cursed him for not driving straight owing to his being more interested in the village and what it might hold than in looking where he was going.

It was on this day I met General Fayolle for the first time. He was much shaken, having been very nearly captured a few hours earlier when driving somewhere near Neuville St. Vaast.

This was the time of the 'race to the sea', when the incongruous, the grim or the unexpected always seemed to be happening. I remember, on the La Bassée road beyond Béthune, seeing a stout peasant woman walking unperturbed, a basket over each arm, down the middle of the road, while French Territorials, finger on trigger, hiding behind trees, were looking for Germans supposed to be just beyond the next rise. A canary rescued from an abandoned house at La Couture; my first introduction to camouflage: a battery of 75's at Richebourg whose limbers were decorated with flowers in shell-cases; French dragoons charging on foot across heavy ploughland, lance in hand, against machine-guns: I can see them now, with horse-hair plumes flowing from their high canvas-covered steel helmets, running heavily in their great leather gaiters and thick red breeches, and then falling, most of them, face forward on the rich

black Flanders earth: this period is full for me of fugitive though vivid pictures such as these. They became rare and finally disappeared altogether as the muddy dullness of trench warfare engulfed the Western Front.

During months stretching into years I had got to know the desolate region between the La Bassée Canal and Arras better than my own village. There was hardly a trench I had not walked down, hardly an observation post I did not know. Most of the sectors had associations, few of them pleasant, except for memories of encounters with some of those perfect men such as one met in the war and seldom since, perhaps because in those days men were just themselves, free souls, unfettered by the chains of self-interest which civilization imposes, and divested of the mask which suspicion rivets on the faces of people in towns.

Some corners were unspeakably grim, for instance the trench near Souchez where the framework of the mud parapet consisted of dead bodies. Equipment and even shelves were laid on feet protruding from the walls.

There was the sinister Cabaret Rouge by Souchez, where the only shelter consisted of the *caniveau* under the road into which one had to crawl on all fours; and the bluff above it, where good sniping at running Germans was to be had through the rolling mist of a morning; and Souchez stream, along whose banks it was easy to lose one's bearings on a dark night. It was near there that I picked up a trophy I still have, a flat drum that was lying by the side of a handsome young German drummer who still held the sticks in his hands. That was way back in the days when the grey-clad waves, their spiked helmets under canvas covers, used to attempt to conquer the plain below with drums beating and bugles sounding the charge.

There was the village of Neuville St. Vaast, sprawling between Souchez and Arras. Now it lay within our lines, but in 1915 the Germans had held it. Mangin had been told to take it, and day after day for a whole month the men of his corps fought their way through its streets. Every house could tell the story of a siege, every stone bear witness to some epic struggle. While his men fought, their grim little commander paced up and down the Chaussée Brunehaut puffing at an enormous curved pipe. They and he had won through; the corps was mangled beyond belief, but its soul remained and was presently reincarnated in a younger body, as

is the way with the immortal divisions of all armies that can never die at the enemy's hands.

The mysterious sinister Lorette Ridge was full of memories also. It was there that the little *chasseur*, done to death by a shell-splinter, said: 'Happily it was not you, *mon Capitaine*.' It was near there too, standing by a battery of 75's which was doing wonderful shooting on the Château of Carieul near Souchez, that I congratulated the battery commander on the way he was blowing up the place. He had a queer expression as he answered — 'I ought to know the target, it's my own home.'

Viewed from the La Bassée Canal, the Lorette Ridge rose straight out of the plain like a cliff, but from the south it looked harmless enough, as a house may look until you are told it is haunted by dreadful ghosts. It must have been haunted indeed, for at no point from the sea to Switzerland were there more dead on so narrow a space of ground. Some said there were 50,000 unburied bodies scattered about the woods and flanks of that sinister spur, every inch of which had been fought over. It contained gullies no bigger than a back garden, no farther from the front line than a man could throw a heavy stone, into which whole companies had dashed with a cheer, and whence not a man, not a single man, had ever come back. All that was known of them was that shouting had been heard, heavy firing, and then perhaps screams long into the night. Then they too had ceased and all had been silent again.

Later I saw those mysterious deathtraps, where I had begun to believe some German dragon lurked that devoured all who approached its lair. They were just sharp depressions, heavily wired on the reverse slope. In those days howitzers were few and it was impossible to search such places with artillery fire. The attacking French had been shot down at ten yards' range on the uncut wire.

From the north the ridge dominated the hideous flat country of Noeux-les-Mines, Grenay, Fosse Calonne, Les Brebis, with Béthune away on the left. One could see all the derelict mining villages, 'London Bridge', the high double-towered hauling-machine, and the many slag-heaps standing out here and there like black pyramids.

It was over that dreary god-forsaken country that our own Battle of Loos had been fought, to be for ever associated with unpleasant memories of muddle and wasted effort, but redeemed, if stupidity in war is ever redeemable, by the heroism of the troops. Those who



took part in the engagement will never forget the sight of our dead, wearing the strange gas helmets of those days like penitents' cowls, lying over the French dead of earlier struggles, now half sunk in the ground. Those layers of dead were as ghastly a sight as the war produced.

Somewhere not far north of Lorette there was a long, low slag-heap I always viewed with particular horror because of a hideous day I had spent there. A trench, its walls lined with stout planks or sleepers, the only means of preventing the slag from falling in, ran along its top. For hours German aerial torpedoes had pounded the side of the heap and by slow degrees the trench began to narrow under the pressure of the explosions. It took us some time to realize this, but gradually we perceived we were living one of Edgar Allan Poe's nightmares. The trench was closing in on us. Sweat poured down our faces when the truth dawned on us. The box we were in was narrowing and the only means of exit, the top, was swept by machine-gun bullets. If you held up a stick for a few moments it was smashed. There had at first been ample room for two men to pass each other, presently this was impossible, soon you could only stand sideways. How we longed for darkness! When it came and we could escape, even I, who was very thin, tore my tunic in my efforts to get out. The side of the trench pressed hard against back and chest. We had trouble in getting some of the men out although all had taken off coats and accoutrements.

Lorette had been finally taken by General Maistre, well liked by his English neighbours; but long after the French held the spur the Germans hung on to Ablain St. Nazaire, which lay dominated by the fragments of its fifteenth-century church on the flank of the ridge. A hollow road ran down the side of the hill to the village. It had a beautiful medieval name, La Blanche Voie, but it was enfiladed from the village and very dangerous.

The inhabitants had left the place in a panic in 1914. Bullet-riddled farm-implements lay about in field and road, where their owners had left them when they fled. In a stable at the western end of the village which we held was the skeleton of an ox still chained to the manger. It must have died of hunger between the lines.

The fighting in the valley around Carency had been desperate too.

The French had driven the Germans back yard by yard. The village itself and the defences about it had been captured by General Pétain's corps in 1915, in what was probably the best planned and most successful minor operation of the whole war.

Then there was the Moulin Topart, from which such a good view of the whole valley southwards could be obtained, and Mont St. Eloi, fragments of whose lofty tenth-century towers still stood up visible for a great distance. When I first came to the sector an old woman had lived at the foot of these towers. For long her family had remained, incrusting in the place where they were born as is the way of French peasants, but they had gone at last. She alone stayed on, though big shells fell about her day and night. Then one day she was killed. For a time the cellars of the houses were empty save for soldiers, then, drawn by the magnet of their love of the soil, some civilians returned. Then one day the Germans dropped poison-gas shells on the place, and they also were killed, for they had no respirators and were helpless.

I remembered too the Bois en Hache. One night in 1915, crawling on my belly through a kind of mole-run under what was left of the wood, I reached a dug-out that was a company headquarters. I was expected. Dinner was served mostly on folded newspapers, but it was without exception the best and most enjoyable dinner I have ever had in my life, though we could not sit up straight to eat it. It had been prepared by the chef of the Abbaye de Thélème who was now the company cook. The Abbaye had been renowned for its good food in the Montmartre of pre-war days.

It must have been the newspaper correspondents who first described the Vimy Ridge as The Bastion of The Western Front, The Impregnable German Fortress, and the like. Their readers no doubt pictured it as a kind of St. Michael's Mount, or at least as some immense bluff standing out like a transatlantic liner at sea. Had they visited the place they would have been sadly disappointed. Seen from our side it was merely a long, low, ashen-grey ridge. So unmilitary and unformidable did it appear from a distance, that one day an important personage whom I was driving along the St. Pol—Arras road, which ran parallel to Vimy, pointed to the usual columns of smoke from occasional big shells falling on the ridge, and said — 'I had no idea there were factories working so close to the front.' I gasped, then realized that the wind was blowing away from us and

the noise of the explosions could not be heard. I explained and he was thrilled. No doubt he told them at home of the battle he had seen.

For months during the horrible winter of 1914-15 I had been a witness of the martyrdom of the French troops in the shallow trenches (the only ones there were on some parts of the Vimy front), in water up to their middles, on duty for days with only the food they carried with them to eat, and the water they stood in to drink.

It was only as one approached the ridge closely that its formidable nature became apparent. The slope formed a gigantic glacis gently descending to the west, falling sharply to the east, abrupt and steep to the north where it dominated the Souchez stream. The ridge gave the enemy perfect observation for miles in every direction, northwards over Loos and towards the La Bassée Canal, westwards across the broad valley we held, southwards over Arras and the country beyond. To the east the ground dropped suddenly some 400 feet from the crest to the great plain of Douai, an inestimable advantage to the Germans, who could move about the plain unseen and bring their transport and ammunition close to the ridge, where it was safe from all but the steepest angle fire.

Part of the ridge had been captured on May 15th, 1915, when General d'Urbal's Tenth Army launched its great attack. The French troops had rushed the positions, which were less strongly fortified then than in 1917; but on the other hand it should not be forgotten that the artillery support of those days was to that of 1917 as a breeze is to a gale. I myself, following the attack, sat that evening munching some biscuits at a point where I could see the Douai plain spread before me. The enemy's line was broken, his first reaction was very weak, but he counter-attacked and recaptured the ridge. General Foch, who was in supreme command of the operations, had his reserves two days' march away. Long before they were within reach the initial success had been annulled. Nevertheless some 5,000 prisoners were captured. During the period of these attacks the Germans were supposed to have suffered some 60,000 casualties, but this is probably an exaggeration.

Those French attacks, if the gain of ground was small in comparison with the losses sustained, did much to relieve the pressure on Ypres, where from April 23rd till May 15th, 1915, the German onslaught had strained our defences severely. This was after the French Territorials and native troops had fled at the first gas attack,

leaving the Canadians and British unsupported in the right half of the salient.

Later the same year, in September, when we attacked at Loos, the French once again attempted to reconquer the northern portion of the ridge. Determined not to fall into the same error as in May, they packed their reserves into the trenches behind the assaulting troops. These failing to gain ground, the formations in reserve were pounded to pieces by the German artillery and exhausted by exposure, so that they were useless when the time came to employ them. Nevertheless, although the attack failed to secure its objectives, Souchez was captured, as also was part of Givenchy Wood after several days' hard fighting. Very heavy counter-attacks in October were repulsed.

During this September fighting I witnessed one of the most magnificent sights that can have been beheld by anyone during the war. North of Loos some British guns were ordered forward. They were in an immense flat field. To reach their new positions they had to pass through a gate between two tall trees leading to another great field as flat as a table. The German guns had the exact range of that gate and were shelling it. Each gun and limber began to circle on a large ring of its own, gathering speed until the horses were stretched out at full gallop, guns and limbers jumping like small shot on a drum, the drivers down on their horses' necks. Then the first gun made a dash for it. The gate and the trees disappeared in the smoke as the German shells burst over it, then the gun appeared again, untouched, still racing across the other field to its destination. The second gun was now making for the gate at a wild gallop. Before it reached it the German shells found it. Even now my heart misses a beat as I evoke the scene, overturned limber, horses sitting on their haunches, wild confusion. But all the gunners were not killed; there they were, the survivors, cutting harness, hooking up with makeshift contraptions, and off they went again, going slower now, with fewer horses, but still making for the gate, through which a third gun-team had meanwhile passed to safety. And so the game of hit and miss was played out, but before it ended the big field was dotted with still forms and piled here and there with chaotic heaps where whole gun-teams, men, horses, wood and steel, lay inextricably mixed.

Winter had followed autumn on the Vimy Ridge with sanguinary and desperate periods of fighting, notably at the Labyrinth, a

celebrated German stronghold near Neuville St. Vaast. These had alternated with terrible spells of mining, until the slopes of the hill were disfigured by the lips of craters that stood out like huge boils on its scarred sides.

During the winter of 1915-16 I saw an extraordinary sight one day on Vimy slopes. The weather had been even more abominable than usual. The troops were perishing as they stood in an icy mixture of water and chalky clay. Conditions were far too depressing to fight. No one fired, and the German trenches seemed tenantless. A legend grew up that they must be empty, the German garrison carousing somewhere in the back area, when suddenly one day all the trenches collapsed on both the French and German sides. It was as embarrassing as if a lady's bathroom had burst open as she was getting into the tub. Both sides were horribly *géné*. Far from being empty the German trenches were swarming, and I shall not easily forget the impression the enemy made on me. No one fired, it was too obviously checkmate. The first impression was that we had stepped back in time, turned over the leaves of military history and were reliving days when armies not actually fighting were often in close and harmless contact with each other. The Germans, I think, recovered their composure first. The impression of efficiency they made on me was lasting. Sentries in long grey cloaks stood every ten paces or so on what had been the parapet, their equipment perfectly arranged, their heads except for the ears covered in balaclava helmets, their rifles hanging on their shoulders. Nothing more different from these men could be imagined than the prisoners we were used to see slouching about behind our lines. What particularly struck me was that each sentry had slung over his shoulder thick fingerless gloves, hanging by a cord. Every now and then an officer would appear and go the rounds, but before doing so would turn towards the French lines and salute them. All this greatly struck me as in a French coat and helmet I watched the proceedings. To have appeared in khaki would, I thought, have been tempting providence and the German snipers too highly.

On our side things appeared to be rather higgledy-piggledy; small groups wandered about aimlessly, some men working while others tried to cook.

All this time the Germans not on duty were working like beavers at rebuilding their trenches. What seemed to me most insulting was that they kept throwing out buckets of chalk, which meant they

were working deep at a mineshaft, proclaiming that they were intent on blowing us up and did not care if we knew it. Meanwhile the artillery fired overhead and the war was in full progress four hundred yards behind the line.

Suddenly as I stood there a shot rang out and a man a couple of hundred yards behind us fell. '*Schweinhund*' a Frenchman yelled, and the cry was taken up down the line. The German sentries conveyed by signs that someone in the rear was responsible and that in any case the victim was too far back to be really within the truce area, but the impression made was unfortunate. All bent their backs to digging with renewed vigour. Within a few hours the war had started again. But the impression remained that the Germans, who stood on higher ground than we did and behind whose trench we could not see, were better organized, more methodical, more obviously disciplined than the French.

It was during the winter of 1915, at General d'Urbal's advanced H.Q. overlooking the ridge, that I first heard of tanks, though the picture evoked had nothing in common with the final article as I saw it later on the Somme.

A member of our Government was visiting the French General, and at dinner spoke of land cruisers with which the Admiralty was experimenting, monsters that would sail through the German defences. General d'Urbal and his Staff tried hard to conceal their merriment. Truly, they thought, never had the English better deserved their reputation for craziness than upon this occasion. The General twisted his face to hide his smiles, which were more or less screened behind his cat-like moustache, and the younger officers, as soon as the meal was finished, were lavish in their witticisms. Would it not be simpler to pump water on to the Artois plain and sail our battleships on it, easier surely than putting boots on battleships or equipping cruisers with crutches?

Times changed, and the French adopted our idea with greater enthusiasm than it now inspired in us, since they were less familiar than ourselves with the early difficulties and disappointments of the new invention.

At the beginning of 1916, the French Tenth Army, which was facing the Vimy Ridge, wedged between Allenby's Third Army south of Arras and the First Army, was relieved and sent to Verdun. That relief, in abominable weather, was in itself a nightmare. I have a

painful recollection of whole divisions getting mislaid in the back areas, apparently engulfed in the snowstorms.

On May 21st, 1916, General Wilson's IV Corps lost much of the ground on the slopes of the ridge that the French had conquered at such heavy cost. The reckoning with the Germans on that score was put off to a later date.

When the Canadians took over the sector in November 1916 the French dead of earlier days lay about in great numbers. The faded red trousers and dark blue tunics of 1914 enclosing a few bones told the tale of the splendid troops that had once fought and died there. I often heard Canadians speak of those early attacks and say that the courage of those men must have been sublime.

The Canadians as soon as they arrived introduced a fierce activity into the sector. By then it had become an ideal one compared with the Somme, owing to the continuous work of thousands of men, with good communications and fair shelter. Their exuberant spirits, first manifested by considerable artillery activity, were much resented by the Germans. Early in December they put up a notice 'Cut out your damned artillery. We too have been on the Somme'. This appeal met with no response. The Canadians and their British neighbours increasingly indulged in what, had it been applied to us, we should have called frightfulness. Rivalry in raids and other forms of unpleasantness became a regular feature of life on the Vimy Ridge.

South of Vimy lay the beautiful town of Arras in a gentle hollow, overlooked from the east by a semi-circle of low hills and on the west by the southern slopes of the ridge. A cathedral town of some 30,000 inhabitants, Arras was a very ancient city whose history was as old as that of Gaul. Before the days of Christianity it had been called Nemetacum. Devastated once by the Vandals, it now lay in ruins at the hands of another invader. Crusades had been preached there and saints had visited it. It is on record that Peter the Hermit and St. Bernard had each been there in his day. I remembered a cross on a square that commemorated the visit of the saint. I do not know if it still stands.

The great gates of the town which our troops knew so well had been built on foundations laid by Philip Augustus of France to commemorate his victory over Otto IV, Emperor of Germany. Many of the French lords killed at Agincourt were buried at Arras,

and Henry V signed there the convention which brought that campaign to a close. The first 'hand artillery', later to become arquebuses, was used in an attack on the town in 1414.

The sinister Louis XI razed its walls to punish its fidelity to Charles the Bold, but Louis XIV built '*La Belle Inutile*' as the citadel was nicknamed in our time.

Truly an ancient city, entitled to drowse away its days under the Third Republic, dreaming of siege and saint, king and bishop, of Spanish splendour and Revolutionary fury, for Arras counted Robespierre amongst its sons. Its streets had been walked by men in togas, Mongolian invaders had jumped their ponies over its ruins; then had come men in armour, who in their turn had been succeeded by lords in wigs and soldiers in pigtails. Later the streets had shaken to the tramp of Napoleon's armies when the tall grenadiers had marched through. So tall were they that the women had to run to the first floor windows to see over the tops of the high bearskin bushes undulating above the solid, proud, seemingly unconquerable columns.

In 1914 Arras had awakened with a start, but she must have thought she was dreaming still and that the pages of history were being turned backwards, for in 1916 here were the men of Agincourt again, wearing the same helmets and speaking the same tongue, while in their hands they carried queer arquebuses, for Lewis guns were not unlike the weapons of Charles VI's men five hundred years ago. It was all, I fancied, very confusing and painful for an extremely old town, especially when from the familiar plains and valleys she had smiled down on for a thousand years, there now poured a stream of missiles that rent the black stones of her proud Spanish houses into myriads of white fragments.

For years now Arras had lain like a wreck washed up by the tide of invasion, her ruined suburbs sprawling right into the front line. I had seen the destruction wrought week by week by the enemy's bombardment, and watched the beautiful houses on the great square, which dated from the days when the town belonged to Spanish Flanders, crumble, the cathedral and the Gothic town hall collapse, under the German shells. Nevertheless, Arras still looked like a town. In my time, that is when the French held it, the Germans seemed bent on destroying it; there were then practically no inhabitants. Amongst the few remaining was the venerable bishop, who refused to leave until the last of his flock had gone. Later, when the



town was in the British zone, some inhabitants returned, doing good business with a few cafés and even hotels, which gave the place some sort of life. But as I remember it best, in 1915, it was a gloomy spot on a winter's afternoon when shells were falling. The wind moaned through the skeletons of the houses, and the Angel of Death seemed to hover with heavy wings just above the tall gables that overshadowed the city.

General de Maud'huy who commanded in those parts in 1915 used to rush to Arras when he heard it was being bombarded, 'to give an example, to hearten the troops', and if he could lay hands on me (I was attached to his Army) took me with him because the men 'liked to see a British uniform'. How I hated those promenades with long halts in the most exposed places while the General buttonholed any man he could get hold of and started a long conversation. The man and I would exchange glances. He was evidently longing to join his pals in the nearest cellar, and I for my part would not remain there a second longer than I could help, even if by doing so I should send the whole French Army into raptures of ecstasy.

At that time the front line trenches had the peculiarity of running through basements in the suburbs of the town. The Germans were a few yards away. It was a strange sensation to have a kitchen door between yourself and the enemy, and to know that the same roof sheltered you both.

I don't know how they managed it, but the French always did themselves well unless circumstances were really too much for them. There was a mess at Arras in 1915 that always had oysters on Sundays when they were in season. I often contrived to have business there on that day, and was always boisterously cheered and given a generous share of the delicacy washed down with remarkably good *vin blanc*. Then we would go to the station, where only the ticket office remained standing, and stamp ourselves tickets to Lille, Douai, Cambrai and other places on the German side of the line, always intending to claim refunds from the Company for not conveying us there. We were easily amused, which was a good thing, for there was not much to laugh at; yet we did laugh a lot, at each other's foibles, at the tales we invented or remembered, at our superiors. Everybody was young then, except generals, and they were far distant beings who did not often come our way. Youth and youth alone must have been the cause of our otherwise inexplicable light-heartedness.

In the weeks preceding the coming battle the days were quiet enough in Arras save for an occasional explosion as a shell landed with a crash. Not so the nights. Towards evening as the light began to fail, long columns of troops and transport which had made their way towards the city would halt just below the brow of the rise, out of sight of the enemy. They were waiting to cross the danger zone. As the traffic order of the Third Army put it — 'Porte Baudremont. This is the main entrance from the main St. Pol—Arras road. The entrance to the town is through two arches which are liable to be hit by shells, thus causing the road to be blocked.' As all the high roads of the area converged on Arras, the troops going to the positions both north and south of the city had to pass through it.

Directly it was dark the mass of men and vehicles moved forward, often infantry, horse-vehicles and motor transport all abreast. The resulting confusion in the pitch-dark narrow streets can be imagined, men or units trying to reach destinations often unfamiliar in a place whose topography altered according to the amount of shelling there had been that day.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE ARRAS FRONT

THE preparations for the British attack were under the direction of two men very unlike in character yet both extremely good soldiers: General Allenby, commanding the Third Army, and General Horne, commanding the First.

General Allenby gave the impression of being a very big man; although he was not more than six foot tall, he was broad and bulky. He was universally known as 'The Bull'. No one ever disputed the appropriateness of the nickname, and most men who came in contact with him visualized themselves as the china shop. Soon after I joined, my regiment was included in his brigade, and I observed that even officers who in daily military life considerably awed me, my colonel for instance, made tracks to avoid him, and if an encounter was inevitable braced themselves as if for a great ordeal. Close observation of our superiors upon such occasions not only gave my fellow subalterns and myself considerable if well-concealed pleasure, but had the effect, speaking for myself at least, of increasing self-assurance. The man who could make colonels and majors tremble must be, in some subtle way, the unavowed ally of second lieutenants. Perhaps for this reason I never feared General Allenby, but liked and respected him, if such a term as liking is permissible in describing the feelings of a subaltern for a general in pre-war days. Intuitively I sensed a great inward kindness, possibly sensitiveness, behind the massive, stern exterior, and certainly a kindly indulgent humour that was easily aroused.

His passion for tiny exotic birds, which I knew nothing of at the time, throws some light on this side of his nature. The affection of this colossus for the small, bright fluttering things was probably the outlet for some deep tenderness hidden within the hard shell of the man of action.

He had a curious way of cocking his head upwards and sideways when listening to an explanation, causing the pince-nez he sometimes wore to slip on his beak-like nose to an angle no oculist would ever have prescribed, and his big chin would stick out like a snow-plough



HORNE



RAWLINSON



ALLENBY



This massive cavalryman whose determination was proverbial was handicapped in one serious way. An English public school education had failed to connect mind and tongue, with the consequence that General Allenby was incapable of lucid verbal explanation. His words often ran parallel to rather than coincident with his thoughts, indeed sometimes the two tacked very wide of each other. It took a well-drilled Staff to bring them to the harbour of comprehension.

General Horne, the Commander of the First Army, was a gunner, scrupulously careful and with great integrity of character. He was a slight man whose white hair and greying moustache made him look older than his years. His mind neither flashed nor sparkled, but he faced the complex problems of the new warfare honestly, and set about solving them with common sense and professional knowledge. I always held him in great reverence, and suspected him of a certain inward humility not far removed from saintliness. His conscience increased his natural sense of responsibility and impelled him to unrelaxing care, for he was acutely aware that the least mistake would be paid for in human lives.

The work devolving upon the Commanders and their Staffs, and upon the troops in preparing for the attack, was enormous, as I was able to see for myself upon several occasions when I visited the Arras-Vimy area.

The First and Third Armies had been served by two single-line railways which were only capable of supplying half their estimated requirements. The St. Pol line was doubled and light railways were built to batteries and advanced supply bases. Roads had to be constructed, and for this purpose plank-and-slab roads, made chiefly of heavy beech logs, were used. Sawmills were established in neighbouring forests to cut the wood. Miles of pipelines, numerous reservoirs and pumping installations had to be made to ensure an adequate supply of water for the great accumulation of troops, and huts and shelters of all kinds had to be provided for them.

A tremendous amount of digging had to be done. Thousands of tons had to be dealt with under the most difficult circumstances imaginable. The ground was either frozen so hard that it seemed as if dynamite alone could shift the clods of earth, or there was a thaw when the almost unique qualities of the Arras mud revealed themselves. The loamy clay that covered the chalk had adhesive qualities that ought to make the fortune one day of

some enterprising glue-merchant. It stuck to the shovels to such an extent that it was the common practice to throw shovel and load out of the trench together, for no amount of heaving could separate steel and sticky mud. Keeping open communication trenches and digging assembly ones under these conditions was a very heavy task.

The most extraordinary feature of the preparations was centred in Arras itself. The idea of delivering the main blow of the Third Army from a town was a bold innovation. The fact that there were great caves and tunnels under the city greatly influenced Sir Douglas's decision to allow General Allenby to base his plan on an attack debouching from Arras, whose suburbs extended practically to the front line. This solution was not without disadvantages and risk, for Arras formed a narrow defile on which all roads leading up the Scarpe valley converged; a great convenience from the point of view of facilitating preparations, but necessitating at every stage not only secrecy but the most meticulous and careful staff work to avoid tell-tale congestion. The question of providing shelter for great numbers was a vital one, for it was known that when in 1915 the French had attacked in the neighbourhood, the enemy had not only shelled the town heavily but placed barrages on all its exits. Had it not been possible to assemble the attacking troops underground, Arras could not have been used as the springboard of the assault and the town would have proved an insuperable obstacle to an offensive in this sector. The fact that a great many troops could be thus concealed had the great advantage of making a surprise possible. On the other hand if the enemy discovered the plan the consequences might be disastrous, for transport could not move underground, nor were the approaches to the town under cover, and if those elements of the army which must perforce move overground were caught by heavy shelling in the narrow streets before the assault, the result was not pleasant to contemplate.

It is doubtful whether it would have been possible to use Arras as the southern base of our attack at a later stage of the war, when mustard gas came into common use.

Arras owed its caves to the fact that most of its houses had been built during the days when it belonged to Spain and wooden houses were forbidden. Each house had been built from stone quarried directly underneath it, hence the cellars. There were also deep caves which had been formed when the stone for the churches of the suburbs of Ronville and St. Sauveur had been built. These

caves were known as *boves* and were connected by long tunnels that had once been sewers.

General Haldane, who had taken over command of the VI Corps stationed in Arras in August 1916, had set his tunnelling officers to unravel the complicated underground system of the town, and in November had started work with a view to providing shelter for his men long before the spring offensive was mooted. Now three divisions could disappear under the town. The New Zealand Tunnelling Company, assisted later by two other tunnelling companies, drove 28,000 feet of tunnels wide enough to allow fully equipped men to walk down them. The whole underground system was lit by electric light from two power stations and supplied with water by a subterranean pumping plant. A three-foot tramway ran throughout its length. Thanks to it all soil and debris could be removed without leaving any visible trace. Galleries were pushed beyond our front line to within 150 feet of the German trenches. These were to provide covered routes between our front line and that of the enemy which it was hoped to capture. Galleries were driven forward from these to the German trenches where charges were laid which were to be exploded at zero hour; others were to be opened at the moment of attack, and Lewis guns and their crews, suddenly appearing from below ground, were to sweep the enemy trenches with their fire at point-blank range.

Every effort was made to prevent the men realizing how vast the underground system was, and they were kept in ignorance of the existence of the forward galleries. Where entrances to tunnels existed in the front trenches, they were told these were listening galleries.

The Arras sector was not the only one to boast of underground communications. The Canadians dug three tunnels on the Vimy front about half a mile apart and roughly 600 yards in length, leading from the support to the front line trenches. They ran so deep that no shell could damage them. Begun during the winter of 1916 by British labour battalions, they were completed in the spring of 1917 under the joint direction of R.E. and Canadian engineers. Each tunnel was about 6 feet high and 5 feet wide. As at Arras water was laid along them and electric light provided by an underground engine-room. There were many branch galleries and the headquarters offices were comfortably housed there. Narrow-gauge railways ran along them. These had proved extremely useful for



removing the excavated chalk while the tunnels were being built. Now they brought up supplies and ammunition. The labour involved in disposing of the chalk was immense. So that the enemy should not become aware of what was afoot, practically the whole of the tell-tale white material was put in sandbags and conveyed to a great distance.

This chalk, so tiresome from one point of view, had great advantages. The galleries cut through it needed no timbering and were comparatively dry.

A few days before the offensive, the ends of the tunnels, which were almost under the German lines, were to be heavily charged with explosives and sealed up with vast quantities of sandbags, ready to be fired on the appointed day.

Great subterranean dressing stations were also dug, some two-storied and as much as 60 feet deep. Windlasses were provided to raise and lower stretchers. Some of these dressing stations could take as many as 300 wounded (there was one in the Arras sector which could take 700 stretcher cases).

But if we worked hard, so did the Germans. Not only were they busy constructing the great switch line in the Douai plain, but they never ceased perfecting and strengthening their already formidable first line defences and honeycombing the Vimy Ridge with tunnels and dugouts. They were fully aware of our plans, as they were of those of the French on the Aisne. Their Higher Command had even envisaged the possibility of breaking off the battle on the Arras front if the drain became too heavy to fight on two fronts at once. It was with this in view that they had set to work on what they called the Wotan Line, the great switch running from the Hindenburg Line near Croisilles to Armentières. This was duplicated by a line running immediately round Douai and due south of Marquion.

The Army Group of Crown Prince Rupprecht, with the co-operation of the Supreme Command, reinforced the *German Sixth Army*, which faced the British First and Third Armies, with artillery, pioneers, aeroplanes, munitions and mechanical supply columns, etc. From March 19th the movement of reinforcing troops began in the back areas of the *Sixth Army*. Trains ran in unbroken procession, long columns of field and heavy artillery covered the roads, the villages were filled with incoming machine-gun units and newly arrived flying-formations. Innumerable workers, impressed

civilians and prisoners of war slaved day and night at digging the rearmost defences, and the munition dumps about Douai grew into mountains.

The orders of the *I Bavarian Reserve Corps* show that as early as March 21st the only question in doubt was whether the British attack would be confined to the south of the Scarpe or would extend north to include Vimy. The German Intelligence reported the arrival of fresh troops, from two and a half to three divisions. They noted the increase in our activity in the air, the greater numbers of our observation balloons, the concentrated work put into digging what seemed to be assault trenches, and the aggressiveness and strength of our raids.

Towards the end of March, the Germans knew of the assembly of powerful British forces about Arras and were able to form a fairly exact idea of the front of attack. In view of the preparations they had made, the Staffs rubbed their hands: 'The English will not break through.'

The Command was reorganized. The *14th Bavarian Division* was brought from the Somme and joined the *I Bavarian Reserve Corps* which now became known as the Vimy Group, under General von Fassbender. It extended south from Souchez almost to the Scarpe at St. Laurent. North of it the line was held by the Souchez Group (*16th Bavarian Division*). The defence south of the Scarpe including the river was also reorganized. The *IX Reserve Corps* became the Arras Group. It held the line from St. Laurent to Croisilles. The *18th Reserve Division* was inserted into the line in the St. Martin-sur-Cojeul sector. It found, when it took over its section on April 7th, that the Hindenburg Line was in some ways far from finished. The wire defences were good and there were concrete dug-outs, the trenches were deep, but there was no fire-step and they were useless until one had been built. There were few communication trenches between the first and second lines and none to the rear. An enormous effort was made to complete this work before the British attacked, but the weather hindered it.

At the beginning of April, Prince Rupprecht warned the *Sixth Army* that the British attack was coming soon, and placed five divisions behind the threatened front. (This number was increased to nine by the day of the attack.) On April 7th the *Army Group* Staff informed the *Sixth Army* that the British bombardment must be the prelude to the attack. At midday on the same day, the

German *11th Infantry Division* facing Arras reported that the British were massing, and on the afternoon of Easter Sunday sent a message that the assault was imminent.

General von Kuhl thinks it might have been wise to withdraw from many points, but, as Sir Douglas had foreseen, the Germans attached too much importance to the Vimy heights to surrender ground whose loss, they argued, would make the Douai plain untenable. In this von Kuhl holds they were proved to be wrong.

The British Command recognized that the success of the forthcoming battle would depend largely upon the artillery. Guns and guns alone could smash a way through the formidable German defences. Our artillery had happily vastly improved both in technical knowledge and in material. Best of all perhaps, compared with the past, supplies of shells were seemingly unlimited. The time was over when we had to count them as it were with a dropper. The danger now was lest our guns should through over-firing be worn out faster than they could be replaced. During the greater part of 1917 there was enough ammunition in France to wear out all our guns. Luckily it was found in practice that the life of guns and especially of howitzers was considerably longer than had been anticipated.

The only limit to expenditure during the forthcoming battle was the size of the dumps that had been accumulated; these took a long time to build up. The quality of our ammunition had also vastly improved. Duds shells were rare owing to the perfection of the percussion fuse, a pleasant change from the Somme, where great numbers of our larger shells could be seen lying about unexploded in every direction.

The introduction of the new 106 fuse proved revolutionary, not only to our artillery tactics but to the method of attack as a whole. This fuse burst the shell on contact before it had had time to bury itself, thus making it a terrible killing-machine. None of the fragments was lost. With the earlier form of fuse the shell buried itself before exploding, and the hole it made formed a kind of blunderbuss-barrel guiding the force of the explosion upwards. Shells fired with the new fuse were found to be not only far more deadly than the older type but also absolutely devastating on wire entanglements. One well-placed shot could blow a gap clear through an ordinary wire belt.

As far as the higher formations were concerned, an important

innovation had been studied and was to be applied in the case of two divisions. These were to leapfrog over each other as battalions had long done, that is, the objectives of the leading unit having been secured, the following division was to pass through it and attack the further objective. Although the British Command rejected the headlong theories of the French, this idea emanated from the latter. It was a method which required very careful thinking out and minute staffwork. It is regrettable that, through want of confidence perhaps, only two divisions were to carry out this manoeuvre.<sup>1</sup>

On Vimy, save when a raid was in preparation, life had, for the last few weeks, been as monotonous as usual; but all units out of the line were continuously trained for the great offensive. Even troops in reserve were kept hard at it. In the dead ground behind Arras and at other points close to the front, training in Lewis gunnery and with rifle grenades was given. Every effort was made to shake off the lethargy inherent in trench warfare. The importance of pressing forward the attack relentlessly was urged upon officers and N.C.O.'s. The conception of warfare as merely a matter of digging trenches and getting into them, and the idea that it was quite impossible to advance save under the protection of a barrage, was discouraged. It was impressed upon all that a slow advance gave the enemy's reinforcements time to come up. The greater the speed the less the resistance, was the motto inculcated. As one set of instructions put it, 'A few sticky company commanders may not only delay the whole operation, but, by giving the enemy time to reinforce, will also cause unnecessary casualties'.

This meant in practice that if something went wrong somewhere the line must not halt everywhere, but every endeavour should be made by the majority to keep up with the barrages, which had perforce to be regulated with the precision of a chronometer. Islands of resistance should be turned and left to the reserves to deal with.

A reaction against the cult of the grenade had set in. The rifle was hailed as the more aggressive weapon. As one commander pointed out to his officers, 'If you met a tiger coming down the street, you would shoot him, not chuck a bomb at him.'

Infinite trouble was taken to familiarize all ranks with the ground and obstacles they would have to deal with when they attacked. Clay models were made, sometimes on a large scale, and these were

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXV (page 584).

closely studied by officers and N.C.O.s. In the back areas, on ground resembling as much as possible that to be attacked, accurate reproductions of the enemy's trench system based upon aerial photographs were prepared. Dummy trenches were ploughed out or taped, and the men practised time and again over the course. Mine-craters, strong points, machine-guns and dug-outs were indicated as far as they were known, and every man knew exactly the part he was to play. 'This party will make for that dug-out and bomb it, this other will make for that point with a Lewis gun, that one will mop up that section of trench.' Over and over again the game was played, until each individual could make his way to his destination blindfold and was word-perfect in the quaint nomenclature of trench topography. 'Lone Copse, Muck Trench, Bomb Trench, Gotha Trench, Scrum Trench, Fred's Wood. . . .' The men grouched, voiced the opinion that it was all damned nonsense, but at heart were vastly impressed by the thoroughness of the preparations.

On certain days the air force and the artillery co-operated in the training, making it even more realistic and useful.

The new mental attitude of the Command was conveyed to me vividly by General Harper, whose Division, the 51st (Highland), was to take part in the attack. After asking me how the French were getting on and what formations they had employed when following the Germans to the Hindenburg Line, he explained his methods of training. The time had come, he said, when soldiers should use their brains again, and this principle he certainly applied. The advance in tactical instruction in his and other divisions since the Somme was extraordinary.

I had not seen General Harper since 1914, when he was in charge of Operations at G.H.Q. Before that I had known him at the War Office, towards which he would wend his way on a bicycle. Being a tall man, he rode an enormous machine with immense handle bars like the horns of the Bull of Bashan. Fine looking, with an aquiline nose and snow-white hair though his moustache was black, he was known as 'Uncle', and also as 'Old Arper' after an incident which had occurred at Abbeville in 1914. Some visiting politicians, passing the Operations 'A' Office, asked Wully Robertson the meaning of the letters 'O.A.' stuck prominently on the door. 'Old Arper', said Wully, laconic as usual.

Instruction was not confined to lessons given in rear but was

tested by the grim reality of raids. These threw a vivid light on the great number of points it was necessary to foresee and deal with; the neglect of any one of these being only too apt to change success into failure. We owed much of our success to these raids, which were of all kinds: daylight and night, big and small, with artillery preparation and without. Stokes mortars and 18-foot Bangalore torpedoes might or might not be used to cut wire; smoke screens to blind the defenders and hide the attackers were sometimes tried.

As the time for the offensive approached, raiders were given the special task of wrecking the German defences as far as possible. Mine-shafts, machine-gun posts and dug-outs were destroyed time and again. Every device for surprising the enemy and testing the efficiency of our artillery in cutting wire was resorted to, but invariably the same lesson emerged—speed makes for safety, careful planning for success. Above all the men learnt how to follow a barrage. They gained confidence in the shrapnel barrage and reported that they were able to wait in what was left of the enemy's wire while our guns were still shelling his front line. This meant a great shortening of the time it took the men to jump into the German trench and was therefore of vital importance.

These miniature battles were a fine sight. At a given signal our people were out of the trench like hounds breaking cover, and dashing across no-man's-land like a pack in full cry.

Raids proved it was possible to penetrate as far as the enemy's third line, and that the attackers, following closely on the heels of the barrage, could surprise the enemy in his reserve line dug-outs. These raids furnished a great deal of valuable information. It was discovered, for instance, that in many sectors the enemy defended the space between traverses by means of loopholes cut into them. The entrances to some dug-outs were similarly protected. It was impossible to see loop-holes until you were actually upon them. The best way of dealing with such devices was to remain in the open and either shoot down into the trench or throw bombs into it. To get immobilized in a trench full of booby traps in which you were apt to lose your way, did not pay. What frequently happened was that hardly were the raiders in the enemy's trenches when they were assailed by German storm troops advancing down communication trenches throwing a hail of bombs. When this happened and our men were

ordered to get on the parapet and shoot, we got the better of it even when facing such fine troops as the Bavarians, who occupied a considerable portion of the Vimy Ridge, and whose staunchness and bravery much impressed our men. They defended the entrance to every dug-out. Throwing Mills bombs down the stairs was no good. Hardly had the sound of the explosion died away when bombs came hurtling through the opening and the defenders were shooting their way up into the open. More drastic measures had to be adopted. The moppers-up were given 20lb. charges of ammonal or phosphorus bombs and tins of petrol. Mills bombs drove the enemy away from the entrance down which petrol was hurled followed by phosphorus bombs. Fire and suffocating smoke at once filled the dug-out. The ammonal charge then blew in the entrance. Not pleasant to contemplate, this burning out of human beings as if they were vermin, but war is a savage business, and in this close fighting it was essentially a question of the one or the other surviving. If the attacker gave his opponent as much as half a chance, in the blinking of an eyelid the tables were turned upon him and he was butchered. Upon several occasions Germans threw up their hands and released bombs from the parapet by a foot attachment, killing or wounding their captors. When this sort of thing was liable to happen, men became disinclined to take chances or prisoners. Safer kill every time, became the motto of the old stagers; blown-in dug-outs tell no tales.

Grim and ugly though the fighting was, a game played without rules within the loose framework of the highest courage and the most extreme cunning, it was frequently illuminated by the most sublime self-sacrifice, as for instance that of a Canadian sergeant named Lloyd, belonging to a Manitoba battalion. He was a member of a raid which took place in March. Its aim was to destroy a mine-shaft which threatened a section of the Canadian line. An engine had been heard working in it. When the bombardment opened, many Germans took refuge inside the shaft. Lloyd crept down the entrance with a heavy explosive charge and, although he must have known he could not escape, lit the fuse. He was buried in tons of earth together with the enemy soldiers. He deliberately sacrificed his life to save his comrades, who would otherwise have been blown to pieces when the mine exploded.

The Germans did not take all this strafing lying down. Although



(top) A DAYLIGHT RAID  
(bottom) SCALING-LADDERS





they much preferred smothering our lines with oilcan trench-mortars or aerial darts to the deadly trench scuffles, they carried out several counter-raids which occasionally resulted in 'winkling', that is capturing some of our men, but these efforts only served to keep our people on the alert. Both British and Canadians became increasingly convinced that, although brave to a fault, the German soldier was no match for them in this sort of close fighting. His reactions were less quick and he was more helpless when 'on his own' than our people.

Under control and with a determined leader the Germans would fight to the last. When ordered to advance they would do so until there was none left to stand. They would stick to a machine-gun or defend a post with magnificent determination, but they were clumsy compared with the British soldier of 1917. They were wooden in methods and movement, wooden in the way their guns fired a fixed number of rounds at the same object at the same hour each day, wooden in their reactions. They lacked initiative, resource and quickness, but never courage, power of invention or industry. They are an enemy who requires time for preparation, and they should never be given it.

## CHAPTER XX

### MICHELER AND NIVELLE

THE conviction that he had discovered at Verdun the magic formula, the Open Sesame that would tear asunder the German defences, exacerbated General Nivelle's fears lest the Germans should escape before it could be applied to them once more, as it had been at Vaux and Douaumont. Having slunk away in fear once, they might do so again. His obsession was turning into a mania. It found expression in a letter he wrote to Sir Douglas Haig on March 31st. (He had written on the same day to his Army Commanders informing them that there were signs of a withdrawal on the British front.)

'You told me on March 21st', he wrote to the British Commander-in-Chief, 'that if the enemy began to fall back on your front of attack you had decided to launch your offensive immediately without waiting for your preparations to be completed. It now appears, from the consensus of reports and indications collected, that the enemy is actually on the point of carrying out this withdrawal. As it is of the highest importance from the point of view of subsequent operations, as well as from that of the immediate advantages to be gained, that the enemy's retreat should be forestalled, you may think fit to give the order to attack. In view of the number of divisions and the magnitude of the means at your disposal for these operations, I have no doubt your Armies will advance rapidly within the German positions and obtain very important results.'

He concluded by asking Sir Douglas to inform him as soon as possible of the date he had fixed for his offensive.

On April 1st Sir Douglas, although most of the reports on which General Nivelle based his assumption emanated from the British front, answered calmly that much contradictory information was coming in but there was for the moment no real indication of the enemy's withdrawing; should they do so he would be ready to attack at short notice with his First, Third and Fifth Armies.

The French Commander-in-Chief's impetuosity broke against Haig's plain unadorned statement of fact, and he was compelled to agree to the latter's incontrovertible assertions, just as he had had to

yield to d'Esperey's arguments concerning the date and extent of the offensive of the G.A.N.

Unfortunately, General Micheler was incapable of Haig's or d'Esperey's frankness in his dealings with the French Commander-in-Chief, and the subtle misunderstanding between the two men, noticeable for some time past, grew deeper every day.

To put it bluntly, General Micheler was trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

As Nivelle had told d'Esperey, Micheler's imagination had been fired by the original plan, and the prospect of having enormous forces at his disposal had led him to view through rosy glasses the chances of the great assault. His enthusiasm had made the Commander-in-Chief feel that he alone amongst the French generals had the vision and faith to be entrusted with the spearhead of the attack. But his confidence had waned as circumstances changed. The fact that the German retreat had sabotaged General Nivelle's schemes struck him as obvious, and he was exasperated by his Chief's stubborn blindness. Yet the underlying weakness of his own character forbade his stating his conclusions frankly to General Nivelle himself, and he dared do no more than tone down the more lurid lights of the sanguine picture he had on so many previous occasions drawn for the benefit of his leader. Temperamentally he could not quite face up to present conclusions, satisfy his own conscience or be quite honest with the Commander-in-Chief. Prisoner of his own earlier declarations, he was getting more deeply involved every day, always hoping that General Nivelle himself would change his plans, but not daring to take the responsibility of telling him he must do so. His procrastination only succeeded in increasing his chief's distrust.

The conflict in General Micheler's soul found vent in an inexcusable practice. Every officer he knew, however junior in rank, became the confidant of his bitter-tongued criticism of the plan of attack, yet in his dealings with Nivelle he was circumspect in the extreme.

To avoid criticism while conveying his growing sense of the need for caution was a problem his subtle mind set itself to solve: but to give counsels of prudence to his Army Commanders without detracting from the impetuosity General Nivelle expected of them, was no easy task.

'Nothing is changed in the conditions of the attack', he wrote

them. 'Nevertheless it may be noted that we may find the enemy in strength in the third and fourth positions where the action of our guns will not have been as effective as on the two first. Although the attacks on the latter two positions should be carried out with the minimum delay and under the prescribed conditions, they should only be made by units echeloned in depth, and in formations as little vulnerable as possible to the enemy's fire. *The advance of the infantry must in all circumstances be closely supported by the guns.*' This last sentence was underlined.

In spite of his subtlety, General Micheler did not manage to escape censure. General Nivelle, noting the contradiction between the first sentence and those that followed, called him sharply to order. Success depended on speed, upon surprise, upon the rapidity with which the infantry would debouch into the third and fourth German lines amongst the German guns. Not a word must be said to stop the rush of the infantry, 'I condemn absolutely the underlined sentence beginning: *The progress of the infantry must be*', was the Commander-in-Chief's comment. The attack must be characterized by violence, brutality and rapidity. No consideration must be allowed which was calculated to diminish the *élan* of the attack, and he asked General Micheler to rehandle his instructions and give them a more vigorous turn.

General Pétain fared little better. He too was told to remodel his orders, on the ground that his plan of attack for the Fourth Army was not based on the assumption that the enemy front would be broken through by a successful assault, to be followed up immediately by the exploitation of the victory. Furthermore, his conception of this operation was based on the initial success of the G.A.R., instead of being an attack delivered at the utmost speed with the object of assuring the independent success of his own Group.

On April 3rd, with a view to emphasizing its determination to press on the attacks, the G.Q.G. took one great ponderous bound forward and descended on Compiègne. This was in our immediate neighbourhood, for the G.A.N. staff had moved to Choisy-au-Bac, only three kilometres from Compiègne, on March 30th. The village in which we found ourselves was half destroyed, and in the present abominable weather was depressing in the extreme.

Nor was the proximity of the Grand Quartier exhilarating. Its vicinity, to outsiders, was as chilling as an iceberg, and we viewed its approach with some alarm.

It was indeed a formidable organism, and had grown out of all knowledge since I had first known it in 1914. No doubt the war had become incredibly complicated, and many services with odd names and mysterious functions were a necessary development of the muddled inactivity of so many years of siege warfare. There was the home front to be watched, requiring a nicely graded and vast range of functionaries extending from those who looked out for spies to those whose duty it was to sing siren songs to the Press. Then there were mapping departments and gunnery departments, sections that looked after the air, inventions, photographs, a section for codes and one dealing with decorations (the latter employed thirty clerks), one to look after carrier pigeons, the immensely important departments dealing with food and transport by rail and motor, and endless supply organizations, ranging from tobacco to duckboards, all this and far more besides over and above the Staffs actually directing operations.

The organization was so vast that the recent disappearance of one of its most important sections was hardly noticed. This was the *Théâtre d'Opérations Extérieures*, the T.O.E. It had at one time been an important cog in the military machine and had given a subtle bias to the direction of the war. Its influence was felt at the Grand Quartier long after its departure. This section maintained its own liaison officers in Allied capitals as well as on exterior fronts, and had been the channel through which General Joffre had gained and consolidated his control of the whole direction of the war. It was the means whereby the French obtained an influence which outlived both Joffre and the T.O.E.

Curiously enough, although this result was not displeasing to the French official and political world, the great civil departments only saw in this section a means whereby the military encroached upon their preserves, and I had many opportunities of observing that never once did their hostility to it slacken. Bureaucracy is a wonderful thing. Even in war-time it knows but one enemy, the person who trespasses into its territory. Every bureaucrat was armed as if by magic with a metaphorical stick to poke in the wheel of the soldiers if they ventured into his realm. The higher interests of the country entered into the matter not at all.

Even lightened by the absence of the T.O.E., now absorbed by different departments in Paris, the G.Q.G. still comprised some 450 officers and 800 clerks, not to mention orderlies, gendarmes and escort.

It may have been cosy enough to live in its charmed circle, but the elect were guarded more carefully than any harem: a male harem, guarded by a police of women-haters, for the gendarmes and detectives, suspicious of a pretty face, gave short shrift to any female who might cause so much as a moment's inattention or challenge a smile from any of its denizens. The whole place was weighed down by a fog of boredom so intense (or so it seemed to the outsider) as to be almost palpable. There was little or no movement in the streets, and nothing to be seen but a dull, impenetrable, enigmatic exterior. The French forces appeared to be ruled by an immobile Buddha who presided over a temple of stern aspect and silent precincts. But in those secret recesses an enormous activity was being carried on. The French are a hard-working race, and their staff officers possessed this quality to the *n*th degree.

Whether it was true, as some outside critics maintained, that this devastating busyness had in the course of long years been canalized into super-bureaucratic tendencies, I do not know. Nor can I say whether in the immense offices much time was spent by highly qualified officers in writing memoranda to each other, for I had no means of judging. But General Nivelle must have come to some such conclusion, for shortly after the move to Compiègne he suddenly turned on the departments and sections of his vast headquarters and shook them up violently. The heads of departments were told that their subordinates had fallen into the sedentary ways of the bureaucrat. They had, according to the Commander-in-Chief, developed habits suitable to government departments (this was an even worse insult in France than in England) and had become petrified into complacent immobility. They must, he declared, discard the routine of the office and resume forthwith military habits and a soldierlike mentality. I do not know whether a palace revolution resulted from this homily, for no sound escaped, no rumour filtered through the proud walls of the Grand Quartier.

Having dealt with his own Staff, General Nivelle, while giving an artist's finishing touch here and there to his plans, turned his attention to raising still further the morale of his armies. The last doses of ginger were vigorously applied.

If the United States declared war, the excitement this would cause was to be used to the utmost to fire the men's imaginations, and the corresponding depression of the enemy was to be taken advantage of. If the weather conditions were such as to make a postponement of the

attack absolutely inevitable, the men were to be told that the weather and only the weather was causing the delay. They were not to be allowed to think for a single moment that the Command was hesitating.

The effect of these admonitions was soon noticeable in the tone of the instructions issued by the Armies. The Fourth Army, for instance, which a few days previously had been criticized for timidity in its orders dealing with the exploitation of the anticipated victory, now issued the following instructions.

The High Command releases formations from the care of protecting their flanks. It will ensure their being supported. The troops charged with exploitation, animated from the leaders down to the last man with the resolve to reach a disorganized and demoralized enemy and break down his last resistance, must have but one care, that of moving fast and hitting hard. It is the duty of the command to raise the spirit of the troops to the high level required for the proper development of the operations.

In his instructions to the Group Commanders the Commander-in-Chief explained that no immediate assistance from either the Russian or the Italian Armies was to be expected. There was therefore no ground for deferring the attack in the hope that they would participate in the general offensive. Delay, on the other hand, would enable the enemy to make full use of the troops liberated by his withdrawal on the British and G.A.N. fronts.

There were other reasons why the attack should not be put off, and these interested me personally far more than hypotheses concerning Russians or Italians. The British preparations were unfolding themselves with methodical regularity and any postponement of the offensive would be most serious for them. The counter-battery work had begun long since. The shells allotted for the destruction of the German gun-emplacements were even now being fired. To spin out or interrupt the programme would inevitably mean jeopardizing its success. Either ammunition would run short at the dumps, or the enemy would be given time to make good his losses, repair the damage and prepare new positions. An attack of such magnitude, where everything has to be prepared in the minutest detail, hangs in the last resort on a thread. It was impossible to alter the timing of the immense machine without the risk of putting it completely out of gear and incurring the danger that, by delaying the moment of



impact, the enemy would be given time to alter his dispositions. Delay might in fact change probable success into certain failure. On the other hand it was equally obvious that, as the British attack was the prelude to the French onslaught, and would be meaningless if not followed by it, it was essential that our allies should launch their offensive within a short time after ours. Yet the desperate efforts they were making to prepare their new positions in time were being nullified by the implacably bad weather.

The odds were constantly increasing against General Nivelle, who had so imprudently decided to stake his country's fate on that most extravagant of doubles, time that has but one pace and weather the most uncertain starter in all God's stables. The latter was so incredibly, so unbelievably bad that in any other circumstances it would have been funny. From the low grey skies, snow and sleet poured from apparently inexhaustible reservoirs of icy water. Bitter winds churned up angry waves on the slow-flowing Aisne, while in the merciless heavens ever more aggressive German planes flew in close formation, pouncing on any isolated or slow flyer on our side who tried to take advantage of a slight lifting of the clouds, a moment of sunshine, to observe for our guns or attempt to photograph the enemy's lines.

Those whose duty it was to collate information on these matters were becoming more and more anxious as report after report came in concerning the constantly growing combativeness of the German aircraft on all the fronts of attack, including the British. Fighting in the air became more frequent every day, and many of these encounters did not terminate in favour of the Allies. The German air bombardments increased in frequency and intensity. More German artillery observation planes were seen than ever before, while double the usual number of sausage balloons festooned the horizon. One corps sent in the ominous report that the French did not hold that ascendancy in the air they had possessed from the beginning of the Battle of the Somme, 'a fact which had such great moral and material importance'; and General Mangin warned General Micheler that unless mastery of the air were obtained the preparation of his attack might be delayed. He begged that at least the protection of his artillery observation and reconnaissance planes might be assured.

The earth was even more discouraging than the sky. The chalky ground under the continuous downpour, churned up by millions of

fect and thousands of guns and waggons, dissolved into white slime. Mud, the implacable enemy of the soldier, was rising up in a sea about him. From every H.Q. observation post and battery the prayer went up — 'Oh let the weather be fine', while the driver of every lorry skidding on the pitted roads, every sodden infantryman, every cavalryman standing by his wretched tucked-up mount, cursed and used language which the recording angel must surely have overlooked. Time was no longer counted in days but in hours, and they slipped by. On each one was inscribed a phase of the opening stages of the great offensive. In the absence of fresh instructions the programme had begun to unfold slowly. Any change there might be could only take place within the narrowest limits.

On April 4th, General Nivelle summarized in a *directive* addressed to all the Armies the special instructions that had been issued to each.

This *directive* made it amply apparent that now, at the very last moment, in spite of all the changes in the situation, the French Commander-in-Chief's conception had not altered since December 1916. Its concluding paragraphs ran:

All Armies will draw up their plans for the exploitation phase in the broadest and boldest spirit. Thus the British Armies having captured Douai and Cambrai will advance on Valenciennes, then on Mons, Tournai and Courtrai, constantly broadening their action towards the north.

The first objectives of the G.A.N. in the exploitation phase will be the railways leading from Hirson towards Cambrai, Valenciennes and Maubeuge.<sup>1</sup>

Only one concession was made to the doubts of General Nivelle's subordinates, doubts which had been reflected in so many of the orders they had issued: he sent out to his Group Commanders a note, also dated April 4th, in which he said:

I have prescribed in my *directive* that the exploitation stage of the forthcoming operations should be undertaken with all the necessary vigour and audacity, and I am convinced that no leader will fail to display these essential soldierly qualities. But, so as to avoid any false interpretation, I think I must add that audacity should not be taken to mean temerity. Because an operation is carried out with decision, audacity and rapidity — 'when lightning can be used it should be preferred even to cannon' — it does not mean that any of the measures intended to forestall surprise, reduce losses, etc., should be neglected.

<sup>1</sup> See Map facing page 560.

On the contrary, a Commander who advanced without being properly covered at adequate distance, who attacked a position occupied by the enemy without carrying out the necessary preparation, would incur the most serious responsibility. The success of an operation does not depend only upon the audacity of its conception and the vigour of its execution but also upon the care with which it has been prepared.

This qualified note of prudence, sounded as an afterthought, did not mean that any doubts had penetrated General Nivelle's mind. He was like a man under a spell. The German defences were obliterated in his imagination, and he could only see himself galloping in the open country beyond, over the territory he was to free. He was still haunted by one fear only, that the Germans would escape him, but as the days went by he must have felt growing reassurance on this point. They gave no signs of withdrawing. The Allied bombardment had started. The counter-battery work of the G.A.R. began on the 2nd and was to be carried on 'with discretion' until the 4th inclusive. On that day the *bombardement de destruction* by the British Second Army which was to last four days was to begin.<sup>1</sup> The intensive artillery preparation of the G.A.R. was to start on the 7th.

General Micheler was told that should Sir Douglas ask for a postponement of the date of his attack before the 6th it might be granted, since this would not entail prolonging the *bombardement de destruction* of the G.A.R.

On the 4th there was a further heavy fall of snow, and it may well be that under these conditions General Nivelle hoped that Sir Douglas would ask that the attack should be put off. This he did at a personal interview on the 5th. In his opinion it was imperative that the attack should be deferred for twenty-four hours owing to the deplorable weather conditions. The extra drain on the munitions, though serious, was in the British Commander-in-Chief's opinion worth incurring on the chance that the weather might improve.

General Nivelle agreed to this and informed his Group Commanders that the British attack would be postponed till the 9th. They were told that the French attacks were in consequence put off

<sup>1</sup> The British Second Army in the north was carrying out an artillery demonstration. In General Nivelle's plan, if the enemy showed any sign of weakening it was to attack in conjunction with the Belgian Army.

for twenty-four hours also, but that they could, if they thought fit, postpone them for two days. The attack of the G.A.C. was in any case to take place one day later than that of the G.A.R. Those of the British Fourth Army and the G.A.N. were to coincide. Again the generals were reminded that the troops must be informed that postponement was entirely due to weather conditions.

Watching the French Army carefully during these critical days, I noted two distinct currents of opinion. Of our own people there is no need to speak. Hating the war with a mighty hatred, they applied to it every adjective their imaginations or education placed at their disposal, but they were doggedly determined to go through with it. It occurred to none that we could be beaten; the worst pessimists imagined a draw rather in our favour. The overwhelming mass believed that somehow, sometime, we should win. The French were determined too, but their morale, unlike that of the British, which as far as anybody could see or guess was like a solid rubber ball tough and resilient throughout, gave the impression of a sail puffed out by a tremendous but temporary wind. The impetus animating the army was made up of hope, an exasperated longing to get it over, and something not unlike despair galvanized into action. The rank and file had an extraordinary faith and belief in their leaders, which considering the endless disappointments the war had provided was both touching and wonderful.

Faith and hope are wonderful things. They certainly prevented the French rank and file from shrewdly appreciating the situation as in other circumstances they would unquestionably have done. Any onlooker visiting the front would have concluded that it was the Germans and not the French who were about to attack. Billets, munition dumps, points of passage and observation posts were kept under constant and heavy fire, and many French batteries were destroyed by the concentrated bombardment of very heavy guns. Soissons, Reims and many other places reeked from the gas shells that rained on them day and night. The men knew all this. They saw the weakness of their own people in the air, and suffered from the depressing and exasperating effect of inadequate artillery support, but they imagined that all this had been foreseen, that it was part of General Nivelle's great plan to deceive the enemy: certainly on the appointed day the air would be screaming with the shells that were now being saved, the ground would be crawling with tanks. The

Commander-in-Chief 'had several new tricks in his bag,' said the soldiers.

There was another current; it was, I observed, confined to officers and flowed silently. It gained strength from an ever-increasing anxiety at the way General Nivelle was defying both the elements and the rules of this particular war as established by earlier experience. These officers could not understand why in 'higher circles' a German retirement was apprehended, and were puzzled to make out on what such a view was based, as it seemed obvious to them that there was all the difference in the world between the fictitious activity observed at the time of the retreat in March and the ruthless determination only too apparent now. Many thoughtful men showed me with expressions of anxiety maps and reports all telling the same tale: the tremendous effort the enemy was making to reinforce his defences, more especially his second and third lines. The Staff of the French Fifth Army even believed he had started work on an entirely new one, making the fourth on their front.

The concern became general, and the most optimistic lost some of their confidence, when the enemy, not content with barking defiance through the muzzles of several thousand guns, embarked upon an almost daily programme of bold, well-planned and determined raids. These culminated in a regular attack which, owing to a most unfortunate incident, had the gravest results.<sup>1</sup>

This was indeed a deplorable affair. In the early afternoon of April 4th, the enemy began a very heavy bombardment on the front of the French VII Corps, in a sector which formed a salient of some ten kilometres east of the Aisne Canal. The troops, with the canal at their back, were soon completely isolated by the shelling, which, carried out by guns of all calibres and mortars, destroyed the trenches and nearly all the points of passage over the canal. Twenty miles away observers noted that the drum-fire equalled that of an attack on the biggest scale. After five hours' preparation the Germans rushed forward on a front of some five kilometres, advancing in three waves supported by flame-throwers. Pioneers, who were to blow up the bridges over the canal, ran forward between the second and third waves.

It was from every point of view what was termed in those days 'a bad show'. The French defence was completely pounded and

<sup>1</sup> See Map facing page 514.

overwhelmed. The German grenade-throwers were bold and extremely well led. The infernal flame-throwers pouring out their deadly tongues of fire lapped round traverses and into dug-outs, burning many of the wounded and those who were lying helpless, blind and gasping. At almost every point the enemy captured the first and second positions and drove the French back to the canal, and even crossed it at the village of Sapigneul, which was to give its name to the engagement.

Liaison on the French side worked extremely badly, all the more inexcusably since visibility was fairly good, for the weather here was better than farther north, where it snowed uninterruptedly all that day. The artillery in neighbouring sectors, and even the heavy artillery of the divisions concerned, was incomprehensibly ill-informed of what was happening in their immediate neighbourhood, and gave little support to the trapped infantry. One of the corps commanders whose forces were engaged (the attack took place at the point of junction of two Corps, the VII and XXXII) only received his first report of the action, and that an inaccurate one, two hours after it had begun; as for the Army Commander, he only heard of it at 11 p.m., nine hours after the German infantry had left their trenches.

Counter-attacks were launched, and these were partially successful, but it was not until the 12th that all the ground lost on the 4th was reoccupied.

I heard at the time that 800 Frenchmen had been captured, but this was probably an exaggeration. Most of the troops behaved extremely well, but the bearing of one regiment was severely criticized. This was the stranger as it was well commanded.

The day after the main French attack had been launched, I learned that during the Sapigneul fighting the Germans had captured an order which gave away a great deal of the French plan. It seems incredible that a document covering so wide a field should have found its way into the front line, but the determination to exalt morale was the cause of this folly. So as to inflame the imagination of the men, it had been decided that they should be informed, towards the end of March, of the grandiose operations in which they were about to take part.

The order in question not only gave the detailed objectives of the regiment to which it was addressed, together with the minute details which formed part of attack orders at this period, but imparted

the importance of pursuing the most vigorous offensive policy.

Now the threatened interference came from the French Government. The British soldiers were ready, as they had said they would be, and it was the French who were lagging behind. Not only did they show every sign of being late, but the Government was apparently meditating postponing the offensive. The change from the ardent Briand to the doubting and perplexed Ribot placed Mr. Lloyd George in an odd position. He had been acting as whipper-in to his impetuous ally, but now found he was not only first at the rendezvous with his pack, but seemed to be running a good chance of having to lead the hunt by himself.

There was much to be said in defence of the attitude of the new French Government. Monsieur Painlevé, the new Minister of War, had realized when he accepted office that he was assuming a very heavy task, but he had never in his moments of greatest perplexity grasped the extent of the responsibility now falling upon his shoulders. He was to become the symbol as well as the victim of a democracy waging war. The worst faults of parliamentary government, supreme but technically uneducated, were about to be revealed.

His position could be compared to that of an engineer, well versed in machinery but unpractised in driving, who suddenly found himself at the wheel of an enormous racing car dashing at high speed down a slippery track.

The infinitely complex problem of the relationship between the Government ultimately responsible for the direction of the war, and the military authorities charged with the conduct of operations, was not solved in his time nor has it been solved since. The most frightful lessons did not lead to reform. Even the disaster of March 1918, which imposed a single command upon the Allies, did not furnish a complete answer to the enigma, although stronger men and eventually overwhelming numerical superiority served to cover the defects of the system and to conceal difficulties.

The French Parliament had put its finger on many weak spots, sensed many weaknesses. The Army Commission, for instance, had foreseen and demanded a vast number of quick-firing heavy guns (155mm.) long before the Grand Quartier had asked for them. Deputies, many of whom had served or were serving with line regiments, were familiar with the soldiers' exasperated knowledge

of the mistakes made by the seemingly blind Staffs at the back, and had a far better appreciation of the psychological state of the army than had the G.Q.G. Parliament too had a closer knowledge of the resources of the country than had the Staff, but it could not, it never can, command the army, nor can the Cabinet.

General Lyautey, the first Minister for War under the new system, had evolved a kind of hybrid organization personal to himself. A soldier in a civilian post, he had usurped a certain amount of the technical authority hitherto jealously preserved by the G.Q.G. His successor, Monsieur Painlevé, was left to sort things out. He could boast no specialized knowledge. The Staff he found at the Ministry was not qualified to tender advice concerning operations on the Western Front. The staff dealing with the exterior theatres, the T.O.E. referred to in an earlier chapter, which had grown up in Joffre's shadow, torn from the G.Q.G. by Lyautey, now looked to the Minister for War as its supreme chief. As my friend from Paris had told me, Painlevé had thought of creating a post corresponding to that of the C.I.G.S. in London, and of giving it to General Pétain, but Monsieur Poincaré was opposed to the appointment. General Henry Wilson states in his diary that he gathered Painlevé was put off the idea by his colleagues, who told him that Pétain would run him instead of his running Pétain, but I do not believe that Painlevé was influenced by any such consideration.

In attempting to sum up the elements of the situation he had to face, Monsieur Painlevé began to understand that he could not obtain or impose modifications of General Nivelle's plan, which would have been the mode of escape, the compromise, his civilian mind was seeking. He knew that the Army Commanders, men who not only commanded their troops but exercised an immense influence over them as well as upon public opinion, were growling disapproval of the plan, and he had made it clear to Monsieur Ribot before he consented to join the Government that he must be free to reconsider the question of the offensive; but he now realized that he must either accept it as a whole or reject it, which meant dismissing General Nivelle: a course even Pétain, Nivelle's frankest critic, thought impossible. To deprive the army of its leader on the eve of an offensive on which the country had pinned its faith might well lead to mutiny and perhaps to revolution, for there were disquieting reports that the morale of some sections of the population was deeply affected.

How could the Minister contemplate bearing such a responsibility?



If he dismissed General Nivelle and put off the offensive, he would be stigmatized as the man who had destroyed the opportunity of winning the war at one stroke. It says much for his courage and patriotism that, although well aware of these considerations, he did not allow them to affect his judgment.

Painlevé's prestige was immense. Parliament, which had tacitly abdicated its powers at the beginning of the war in favour of the Commander-in-Chief, believing that civilian control was incompatible with military efficiency, had reasserted its sway and stood behind him as the representative of its supreme authority. Feeling that the problem of the nation in arms with all its infinite ramifications was one that exceeded the capacity of soldiers, it believed that things would be better now that the Minister held an effective watching brief on its behalf.

The trouble was that he could see and sense the difficulties that stood in the way of the successful execution of General Nivelle's plan, but he possessed no scale whereby he could measure his deductions and doubts against the fervid assertions of the Commander-in-Chief.

The man who had consented to don this shirt of Nessus was by a freak of fortune a great mathematician. Having inexplicably wandered into politics, he enjoyed the respect which all classes in France accord to a scholar, a savant. The abysmal difference between the exact science in which he excelled and the sinuous path of politics he now followed may have accounted for the puzzled expression he often wore. Maybe as he walked through the corridors of the Chamber of Deputies, tendering a limphand, as is the French way, to be shaken by every colleague and journalist he encountered, he wondered why, contrary to the teachings of Euclid, a straight line was not, in that place, the shortest distance between two points.

Later he was to be accused of vacillation, but it would be truer to say that he was slow to make up his mind, which, trained to weigh facts objectively, rebelled against ill-considered decisions. When he saw his path clear he followed it boldly and with courage, but his mental honesty often caused him to hesitate between conflicting claims. Always inclined to believe in the integrity of others, if a case, even a bad one, were boldly presented, it did not occur to him to counter it by contradiction. He would inwardly review his previous conviction, comparing it with what he was now told, dispassionately, with a perfectly open mind; and it always took him

some time to form a judgment. This led many to think he could be bluffed and browbeaten: this was not so, although there were times when he did lose the thin thread of truth in the complex texture of conflicting facts. A more brutal mind, a more limited vision, a stronger will, would have served him better in the position in which he found himself than all his brilliant intellect. Straight, simple, fair and devoid of personal ambition, he realized that the war was a joint undertaking. He never failed to consider the interests, the point of view and the feelings of his British allies. To him it was never merely a case of 'France and some others'.

This kindly little man was not an impressive figure. We should have called him short. In France they would say he was of middle height. A square head and face built round a nose rather like a turned-up thumb; prominent blue eyes that occasionally twinkled when he told you, with a humour devoid of bitterness, of the foibles of this colleague or that; untidy curly auburn hair concealed when out of doors by a very French bowler hat, that is a hat that to us would seem several sizes too small, very high in the crown, which he wore well forward and rather over one eye; a bushy nondescript moustache that would have responded to care and curling but got neither; fresh-coloured, rather hanging cheeks; very square shoulders; a high metallic voice like the crow of a cock—such was the man, too trusting and loyal to make a really good politician perhaps, but very likable for all that.

He was a Radical, a man of the Left, with intense human sympathies. To him Mr. Lloyd George was the pattern of what a politician thrown up by the people could do for the people. The Welsh statesman exercised over him a personal fascination which can only be compared to that which the snake is supposed to exercise over the rabbit.

Two days after he assumed office, on March 22nd, Monsieur Painlevé saw General Nivelle. He told me later what had occurred at that interview. Quite frankly he had said that had the choice been in his hands he would have appointed Pétain to the supreme command, but that as far as he was concerned the question was now finally settled, and he meant to give Nivelle all the support that lay in his power. The Commander-in-Chief, Monsieur Painlevé told me, had asserted that he considered the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line to be advantageous to the French since it liberated more French than German divisions. He took the Minister aback

by saying that the Russian breakdown hardly affected his plans, since he had never really relied on Russian co-operation. And to the question — did he not fear the arrival of German reserves from Russia? he answered: '*Monsieur le Ministre*, I fear but one thing, that the Germans will retire.' And he added: 'One lesson stands out clearly from recent operations. Troops that have lost their manœuvring power owing to years of trench warfare are quite unable to pin the enemy to his ground and force him to fight if he is unwilling to do so. I do not fear numbers. The greater the numbers the greater the victory.'

As for the tactics of the battle, General Nivelle brushed the whole question aside. The German front would, he asserted, be broken almost without loss. He had the plateau of Craonne in his pocket. All the gunners were certain of this. The tanks would deal with any machine-guns or wire the artillery had not destroyed. He admitted that the strategic exploitation of the initial success might take a little longer than had been foreseen, but as for the break-through, it was a foregone conclusion.

Such was the tenor of General Nivelle's views, which did not greatly vary at succeeding interviews, one of which took place on March 26th and another on the 31st, and there is very little doubt, according to M. Painlevé's own account, that the Commander-in-Chief's assurance always impressed him.

On March 24th, Monsieur Painlevé paid a visit to Sir Douglas Haig at Montreuil, which made a lasting impression on him. Ever afterwards he looked upon the British Commander-in-Chief as his friend.

Sir Douglas liked the little Minister, and was frank and cordial with him, completely winning his confidence. He made him realize that the British, having abandoned the attack in Flanders they favoured, and being now engaged in an operation where their rôle was reduced to that of auxiliaries to the French attack, would irretrievably waste the terrific weight behind their blow unless the French attack followed the rhythm and tempo which had been carefully worked out.

Sir Douglas gave no sign of the growing exasperation at G.H.Q. lest the Ministerial team of Doubting Thomases which the vagaries of French politics had just thrown up should jeopardize the success of the British effort on which hundreds of millions of money, a colossal amount of material, and a host of precious lives were being

staked. Nor was M. Painlevé allowed to perceive even a trace of ill-humour towards General Nivelle and the G.Q.G., which says something for British sang-froid and self-control, for the difficulties between Montreuil and Beauvais continued long after the London Conference, General Nivelle actually going so far, upon one occasion, in contravention of both the letter and the spirit of the London Agreement as to write 'I order the British Army'.

To M. Painlevé this visit was a revelation. He realized how little he had known or understood the British hitherto. In spite of his position, knowledge and very open mind, it came to him as a surprise to find the British Staff really proficient. He looked in vain for the amateurs he had been led to believe peopled G.H.Q. He wondered at the professional ability and knowledge displayed by all the officers with whom he came in contact. They were, he told me afterwards, very soldierlike and, he added, discreet. He must have been thinking when he said this of the frequent and disastrous leakages of information that took place in Paris. He told me that several civilians had informed him of the date of the French offensive long before he heard it from the lips of the Commander-in-Chief.

Speaking of the troops he had seen, he said that they were 'truly magnificent', which was nothing less than the truth; but to him it was something in the nature of a discovery. Not that he as an average Frenchman doubted the valour of our army, but the efficiency and discipline of the men and the workmanlike aspect of everything he saw both astonished and delighted him.

Telling me about this visit, he said smiling, 'Most of your officers found an opportunity of saying to me: "We don't need the Americans to beat the Germans."'

He used to say he then came to the conclusion that the British Army had attained the plenitude of its powers. It was in fact convinced that it completely dominated its opponents. This feeling of self-assurance had grown steadily since the days when the B.E.F., a tiny unit on the vast battle-front, had held the enemy at bay in spite of overwhelming odds. To-day it was strong and possessed all the material it had hitherto lacked. Although terribly mauled during the Somme, even the cruel losses it had sustained there had not weakened it, for its morale was enhanced by the series of successes obtained in that long and bloody struggle of sinews, endurance and will.

The Minister grasped all this from what he saw and heard, and it

cheered him, although it made him think rather sadly, as he watched the young British regiments, of how old and weary his own army was, aged by the elimination of its young men, watered down by the addition of boys and their fathers, crushed by the weight of nearly a thousand days of war during which the maximum effort of the army and the nation had never been relaxed for a moment. He told Sir Douglas of the frightful losses of the French; 1,400,000 men had already been lost to France, killed or prisoners. As for the wounded, they were uncounted. He asked what our corresponding losses were and was told they did not amount to a third of that number, but the sting was taken out of the comparison by Sir Douglas's saying to him—'You have done most of the fighting so far. Now it is our turn to bear the greatest share of the burden.'

Monsieur Painlevé did not gather that Sir Douglas had any real hope that either the French or the British attacks would lead to a break-through; he looked upon them rather as the opening stages of a long, wearing battle, the first of a series of blows under which the German resistance would presently disintegrate. This honest opinion fanned the Minister's apprehensions. He saw the Battle of the Somme re-edited, and France's last levies melted ere the summer was fairly in. Moreover, this point of view was in flagrant contradiction to General Nivelle's. Both Commanders wished to attack, but their conceptions were evidently poles apart.

Monsieur Painlevé returned to Paris pleased with what he had seen, cheered by his reception, but more perturbed than ever. The French military authorities were at cross purposes, and he now knew that the British had yet another theory as to how the attack would develop. He inquired what were the views of the British Government, and was told that they shared the opinion expressed by Sir Douglas, namely that being committed to the Nivelle policy they wished to see it carried out. He gathered that the British Government, like many responsible people in France, viewed the possibility of the war continuing for another year with the gravest misgiving. Mr. Lloyd George in particular clung to General Nivelle's promise of ending it at one victorious stroke.

After the war I consulted Sir William Robertson on this point, and he told me that the Prime Minister was very alarmed at the time by the progress of pacifist tendencies in England and had grave doubts whether the country would hold out.

On the day after his visit to Montreuil, March 25th, Monsieur

Painlevé received a rude shock. Monsieur de Freycinet, an old and trusted French statesman, who had been Gambetta's right hand man in 1870-71, and many times since War Minister, handed him a memorandum which had been brought to him by a colonel on the Staff of the G.A.R., which represented, according to this officer, the practically unanimous opinion of the Staffs of the corps and divisions in that Group of Armies, and had been prepared with the collaboration of a number of other officers on the G.A.R. Staff.

The sense of this memorandum was as follows. The attack was insufficiently prepared and the whole rhythm of the offensive was far too rapid. It had been planned as if it were a *coup de main* with a limited objective such as had been delivered at Verdun. The immense manœuvre now envisaged demanded a very different conception. It might have been successful if it had taken place after the great attack of the British and the G.A.N. as had been originally planned, but the German withdrawal now made this impossible. Both the writer and those whom he had consulted feared that the first waves of the assaulting troops would be stopped by natural obstacles meticulously reinforced by the enemy, and that the following waves would telescope into the first. 'The enemy is undoubtedly aware of the French preparations and has brought up on to the Craonne plateau his best troops and a vast accumulation of guns.' 'If the Germans succeed in preventing the French breaking through it will mean that the best Corps in the army, the I, XX, II Colonial and XXXII, and more besides, will be decimated.'

This memorandum was received, as I have said, on the 25th, and it was on this very day, at an earlier hour, that the War Committee decided to authorize General Nivelle to carry out his plan. Monsieur Painlevé felt he was caught in a cleft stick. In his perplexity he adopted a course recommended by the writer of the memorandum, which laid him open to criticism: he decided to consult the Group Commanders without reference to the Commander-in-Chief.

This came to the ears of Marshal Joffre, who protested in the strongest terms to the Prime Minister, Monsieur Ribot. He pointed out that the most delicate task of the Commander-in-Chief was the organization of the Higher Command with a view to creating absolute unity of view and complete confidence amongst the leaders. The Government, said the Marshal, especially since it had accepted the Commander-in-Chief's plan, should do everything in its power to enhance his authority and should above all things avoid diminishing

the prestige of the leader it had appointed. 'M. Painlevé's methods will tend to provoke discussion in the Higher Command', concluded Marshal Joffre. 'They would undermine discipline at any time, but on the eve of offensive operations they are especially dangerous.'

This was severe censure, but the Marshal always held to his point of view, for he spoke to me in similar terms long after the offensive was over. His opinion was shared by many eminent men, including some of Monsieur Painlevé's own colleagues. They may have been justified in their strictures, but it should be remembered that, unlike our own War Minister, he did not have at his side a soldier responsible for advising him on military matters. He felt it his supreme duty to endeavour to discover whether or not the offensive on which the fate of the French might well depend, and which he had it in his power to stop, should be launched or stayed.

Had the Minister consulted the Group Commanders in the presence of the Commander-in-Chief he would not have exposed himself to attack, but that method would in all probability have yielded no result. This was proved a few days later.

Discussing this point with Sir William Robertson not long before his death, I learnt that he had been faced with a similar problem in the autumn of that same year, 1917. There had come a moment when he had been sorely perplexed as to whether the very costly British offensive in Flanders should be allowed to continue or not. He decided to go over to France to discuss the matter with Haig, who suggested that he should go to see the Army Commanders and talk the matter over with each of them alone. 'You know I could not go to your Army Commanders and discuss your plans in your absence', Robertson said. Haig then suggested that he and Robertson should see the Army Commanders together. 'But in front of Haig they said nothing.' Wully was much troubled, and could not make up his mind whether he had been right or wrong and whether, had he acted upon Haig's suggestion, the result might not have been that the offensive would have been stopped. My impression was that he regretted having followed the orthodox course and thought he should have devised means of forming an independent judgment. So Joffre thought one thing and Robertson another.

General Micheler was the first of the Group Commanders whom Monsieur Painlevé saw. He was summoned to Paris on March 28th. He was now to show definitely that his intelligence was of a far higher order than his character. He was not alone amongst general officers

in failing to discern the straight path that lay barely discernible under the tangle of conflicting loyalties amongst which was entwined the poisonous herb of personal interest; but since he was the most highly placed, and therefore had the most responsibility amongst General Nivelle's subordinates, his lack of moral courage stands out the more glaringly.

Clemenceau had found this out, according to a story of Pierrefeu's which throws a strong light on Micheler's weakness, while revealing the brutality of The Tiger.

Clemenceau was only a Senator at the time, but his formidable personality and the fact that he was a former Prime Minister gave him immense power. He was General Micheler's guest at luncheon one day, and his host was imprudent enough to criticize General Mangin not only before Clemenceau but before a number of staff officers. That general, said Micheler, was exceeding his instructions and displaying temerity in the preparation of his attack. Clemenceau listened, then suddenly, brutally as was his wont, regardless of the audience as Micheler had been a moment before, declared, 'When a subordinate disobeys you, you break him or you are not a leader.'

In his talk with the Minister for War, General Micheler was extremely critical of General Nivelle's plans. It would have been difficult to realize that it was the same man speaking who had been at such pains to try to fall in with his chief's views. On the other hand, although he had nothing to say in favour of the offensive, when asked the direct question — 'Are you of opinion it should be given up?' he began to enumerate the dangers of doing so. This was not very helpful to Painlevé. The criticism the Commander of the G.A.R. made of General Nivelle's present plan was that dictated by common sense. It is strange that he lacked the courage to make these same objections to the Commander-in-Chief, for they vindicated his point of view.

He told the Minister that in its original form the Anglo-French offensive had aimed at cutting off the enormous protuberance formed by the German salient, and that at first he had thought it would be successful and might lead to the capture of 150,000 prisoners. The task allotted to him originally was not an impossible one. He was faced at the time with only two German positions, and General Nivelle had promised him that by the end of February he would be given all the material he would need to deal with these. Now the German salient had been reabsorbed. There were to have been two



British attacks, but only one remained, and that of the G.A.N. could amount to no more than a demonstration. The G.A.R. was faced by four positions instead of two, and these new defences had ample garrisons provided by the divisions the enemy had recovered as a result of his retreat, not to mention those he might have brought back from Russia. The time between the British attack and his own, said General Micheler, had been greatly diminished, thus further reducing the chances of a surprise already compromised by the elimination of so many of the original attacks. Had these taken place as planned, and had they been spread over a wide front, the enemy would have found it difficult to discern which was the decisive one. General Micheler's conclusion was that it was impossible to break through the enemy's defensive system on the first day. The first two positions might be captured, but this could not be done unless they were completely destroyed by artillery fire, which was out of the question unless the weather conditions were very favourable.

He added that if all went well, and if it were possible to bring up the artillery for a second preparation, Laon might perhaps be reached; but that in any case it would mean very heavy fighting indeed and the assault could not be sustained for more than four days at the outside. If by then a break-through had not been achieved there would be no point in going on with the attempt. Even if the attack were successful the troops would be exhausted and a halt would be inevitable. To the Minister's question 'In your opinion should the attack be given up?' he answered in the negative, his main reason being that if this were done the enemy would be given an opportunity of recovering the initiative. There were many sectors on the French front, he said, which had been allowed to fall into disrepair owing to lack of men; besides which, except on the actual fronts of attack the garrison of the whole of the French line was extremely weak. This was particularly true of Verdun. The General even thought that if the Germans were free to do as they pleased they might attack his own armies at some points which lent themselves badly to the offensive, but where nevertheless he had been compelled to maintain an enormous accumulation of men, horses and material, which could not be evacuated either easily or quickly. Anything would in fact be possible, he considered, if the Germans were allowed freedom to take whatever action they chose. They might elect finally to destroy the Russian Army, or

they might attack the Italians. In his opinion the most dangerous and vulnerable point on the Allied front was the Trentino.

He concluded with a suggestion. If the offensive in France were either abandoned or postponed, it would be necessary to send at least eight Franco-British divisions, together with powerful artillery, beyond the Alps. Otherwise the risk of Italy's receiving a knock-out blow would be too great.

General Micheler's exposition was wise and it was certainly a frank one. No one can blame him for giving his views to the Minister when ordered to do so; it is only to be regretted that owing to the subtle influence of military rank he had not been quite as definite in his communications to General Nivelle.

In a letter addressed to his chief on March 22nd, Micheler began by saying that he was enclosing a letter from General Mangin, whose opinions, generally speaking, he supported. After explaining the military position in some detail and the measures he proposed to take, he went on to say that the orders issued on December 30th had specified that the operation had as its object the division of the hostile forces by means of a series of attacks. That of the G.A.R., which was to have come last, would have had every chance of success and of a deep penetration, since it would have had at its disposal more fresh divisions than the enemy.

Now conditions were changed. The only attack of importance besides his own was the British one, which could only be effective if it took place before that of the G.A.R. He was disturbed to think that he might have to attack at the same time as the British.

He went on to describe what his difficulties would be in this event. At worst he would not get through and would find himself engaged in a meaningless struggle; at best he would reach the Serre. If, he concluded, the attacks which in the original plan were to precede his did not materialize, he had little chance of obtaining any result of value. On the other hand he had complete confidence that, should his offensive take place under the conditions first laid down, the G.A.R. would fill the rôle assigned to it. The spacing of the attacks in time was, in his view, an essential condition of success.<sup>1</sup>

Thus he gave the Commander-in-Chief the assurance of victory, provided the other attacks preceded his, and when he met Painlevé he knew that the British offensive would be launched well before his own.

Shortly after seeing Micheler, the Minister saw General Pétain.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXVI (page 586).

The position taken up by that Commander was at least unambiguous. He had never concealed from the Commander-in-Chief what his views were. But for these, Nivelle would have confided to him the chief rôle in the offensive, for his skill as a tactician and as a careful initiator of attacks was unequalled. He told Painlevé that he believed a break-through was impossible. To scatter even the enormous quantity of shells available over the immense acreage covered by the four German positions would do little more than sprinkle them. Even the waters of the Lake of Geneva would have but little effect if dispersed over the length and breadth of the Sahara Desert. When asked by Painlevé what he thought should be done, he gave an unequivocal answer. Any idea of a break-through should be forthwith abandoned, and all the guns now trained on scattered targets should be concentrated on the first two German positions. The attack on these would, he thought, be a costly one, but it would pay, for it would punish the enemy severely, deprive him for the time being of the initiative, and give the French better positions which would also be more economical to defend. He shared General Micheler's views concerning the disadvantage of giving up the offensive, but not his apprehensions concerning the Trentino. Should the enemy attack there before the fine weather set in, the offensive on the Aisne could, he considered, be launched as a formidable counter-offensive.

Monsieur Painlevé also saw General d'Esperey. 'My' General wisely confined himself strictly to the situation on his own front. The Hindenburg Line, according to air photographs, appeared to be sketchy. It was difficult to determine where the truth lay, but d'Esperey was inclined to think that refugees were more to be relied upon than photographs. The Germans might, he thought, have devised some means of concealing their defences. He was facing the unknown, and he told the Minister so. He had no idea, nor could he have, of the immense advance the new German system of defence really represented. We had yet to learn how these lengths of seemingly eccentric and scattered trenches represented a fresh conception of defence, based on a cunning use of ground to obtain the maximum effect from flanking fire, that the strange absence of machine-gun shelters did not mean the enemy had not had time to build any, but on the contrary that they had been replaced by deep dug-outs in which these weapons were held ready to be placed in any odd shell-hole at the last moment.

All he could be certain of was that if he did advance he would find himself in country as devastated, almost as impracticable, as that over which he had recently advanced with such great difficulty. Any attack by his forces would be a risky undertaking, owing to the difficulty of bringing up munitions and supplies across the reoccupied area. He said he could do little to help General Micheler's attack. He certainly could not advance rapidly enough to threaten the communications of the enemy facing the G.A.R. Hardly could he be certain of holding to their ground the German reserves on his front.

I knew something and guessed more of how awkward the Commander of the G.A.N. had felt his position to be during this interview. He could not withhold his opinion if he were asked for it, for M. Painlevé was the titular head of the Armies of the Republic under the President. On the other hand d'Esperey was determined not to be disloyal to his chief. Moreover he felt under a great obligation to General Nivelle personally, for when his son and his brother had been killed at Verdun, Nivelle had shown him the kind of sympathy and consideration which is not easily forgotten. But although he would not say a word in disparagement or criticism of the Commander-in-Chief, d'Esperey's faith in him had been gradually diminishing. He had seen a good deal of General Nivelle, and had observed that even before the German withdrawal he had shown signs of mental fatigue. D'Esperey had felt even then that he was losing grip. When the two men met, Nivelle was as pleasant as ever, but his thoughts appeared to be elsewhere and he seemed unable to shake off his preoccupation.

D'Esperey told me after the war that he had often pondered over the problem of General Nivelle's mentality in those critical days. Recalling conversations with him, his looks and gestures on certain occasions, and his personal attitude as opposed to his numerous letters, notes and orders, d'Esperey had come to believe that, in spite of his apparent confidence, at heart General Nivelle felt unequal to his task and lacked the faith in himself which is essential in a military commander. General d'Esperey, who possessed this quality in the highest degree, would easily sense the lack of it in another.

When he returned to his Headquarters, General Pétain reported to the Commander-in-Chief that he had been sent for by the Minister and questioned. This was perfectly correct, but naturally General Nivelle was furious, and his relations with the Minister, already strained, became tinged with suspicion.

Monsieur Painlevé was becoming desperate. Not one of General Nivelle's subordinates had faith in the wisdom of his plan. It was as if a council had been held on a ship in difficulties. Nivelle kept talking of calm waters on the far side of the reef, taking little account of the formidable barrier that had to be negotiated before they were reached. Pétain said that with great caution and slow progress the passage was worth attempting, but that to sail full steam ahead at the rocky belt meant certain destruction, while Micheler was of opinion that it would have been easy sailing had conditions been different. What was the amateur skipper to do?

His distress was shared by the Prime Minister, Monsieur Ribot, who was not proving a very strong man. Less subtle than Briand, who had managed to evolve a system of government based on exploiting the habitual misunderstandings between his colleagues, Ribot gave way instead of manœuvring. He had already greatly enlarged the War Committee, and included in its numbers, amongst others, Monsieur Malvy<sup>1</sup> at the demand of the Socialists.

To Ribot, Painlevé poured out his troubles and perplexities. These were in the main connected with the offensive, but interwoven with all his other problems was his concern about General Sarraill, who was detested in the army but to whom he extended a never wavering and often pugnacious protection. To him Sarraill was the eternal victim of his Liberal tendencies, and he invariably suspected that any general who was deprived of his command was suffering because he was believed to be a friend of that stormy petrel of the French military hierarchy. After complaining that General Roques, a former Minister for War, had certainly lost the command

<sup>1</sup> Monsieur Malvy was believed at the time, rightly or wrongly, to lead a gay life incompatible with the importance of his functions. He was accused by Léon Daudet, later in 1917, of the gravest crimes against the State. Monsieur Daudet wrote: 'Monsieur Malvy, ex-Minister of the Interior, is a traitor. He has betrayed the national defence for three years with the complicity of Monsieur Leymarie and some others. Proofs of this treachery abound.' The accusation followed that Monsieur Malvy was instrumental in informing Germany of France's military plans through the band of spies of the '*Bonnet Rouge*', which included Almeyreya. Malvy was tried before the High Court of the Senate and condemned in August 1918 to five years' banishment and civil degradation, and it was ordered that his conviction and sentence should be placarded all over France.

He returned to France at the expiration of his sentence in 1923. He was re-elected Deputy for his old seat which he has held ever since. From 1924 to 1936 he was President of the Finance Committee of the Chamber.

My own impression always was that M. Malvy may have been imprudent and consorted with undesirable persons, but that he was never guilty of a crime against his country. He was, I thought, the victim of the wave of exasperated nationalism born of France's darkest hours, when victims had to be found. His electors evidently came to the same conclusion.

of his Army because he had defended Sarrail against the Grand Quartier, he told the Prime Minister of his conversations with the Group Commanders.

M. Ribot thereupon decided to consult Marshal Joffre, availing himself of the opportunity afforded by the request the Government wished to make to the Marshal that he should go on a Mission to the United States.

Joffre renewed in strong terms his objections to political interference with the Command. The morale of the army was, he said, high; in his opinion the attacks were certain to yield an initial success. No one could foresee its extent, but the battle should be embarked upon with confidence and then pressed home, for none could tell whether victory, apparently far distant or even unattainable, might not be won by a further determined effort of courage and will mastering exhaustion.

The Marshal took this opportunity of preaching the doctrine that the Western Front was the principal one, and he reminded Monsieur Ribot that our own difficulties always loomed larger than those of the enemy. His conclusion was that in spite of all their problems and anxieties the situation of the Allies was far better than that of their opponents.

This was on April 1st. The next day, Monsieur Painlevé, making the imminent entry of the United States into the war a pretext (they came in on April 6th), suggested to Monsieur Ribot that there ought to be a conference at which the Commander-in-Chief should be given an opportunity of stating whether this entirely new circumstance, combined with many others, did not alter completely the underlying principles on which his plan was based. To strengthen his hand he brought with him to see the Prime Minister Generals Pétain and d'Espèrey, whom he had summoned to Paris. The interview took place at the Quai d'Orsay in the presence of Admiral Lacaze and Monsieur Thomas. Afterwards Ministers and generals returned to the Ministry of War where they dined. This was almost the first meeting Admiral Lacaze and Monsieur Thomas had had with General Pétain. They hardly knew him, although they knew General Nivelle well. The atmosphere was cordial and discussion very free. Ribot was more perplexed than ever. The opinion of the generals was clearly against the offensive, but the majority of his Cabinet colleagues were opposed to assuming the great responsibility of interfering with the plans of the Commander-in-Chief.

Finally he agreed to Monsieur Painlevé's suggestion, and Nivelle was invited to come to Paris on the following day (April 3rd).

Again there was a dinner at the Ministry of War, but one who was at both meals told me that on this occasion the atmosphere was very different from that of the previous night. There were present General Nivelle, Monsieur Ribot and the three Ministers of National Defence, Painlevé, Lacaze and Thomas. Monsieur Maginot, the Minister for the Colonies, was also there. He was an enormous man, liked by some, feared by others, not above political intrigue, it was said, and, but this was only whispered, a frequent guest at the gambling parties given by Malvy, the Home Secretary. That unfortunate man was already beginning to be the centre of much unpleasant gossip. Be that as it may, Maginot had done his duty. He was brave and patriotic and had lost a leg while serving as a sergeant. He attended the meeting in a double capacity, ostensibly because many Colonial troops were about to be engaged, but in reality because he was known to be a friend and supporter of General Nivelle. He had promised to report what transpired to Monsieur Poincaré; for the President of the Republic, jealous of his rights, resented the fact that he was not kept fully and constantly informed of the views of the new Government.

After the meal all present adjourned to the Minister's great study hung with portraits of his predecessors in the courtly costume of pre-revolution days. There an unofficial council of war took place. The Ministers sat in a semicircle facing an enormous map of the Western Front that hung on the wall. Monsieur Maginot had his wooden leg extended on a chair as was his habit, his two sticks on the floor beside him.

Monsieur Painlevé opened the discussion: his premises were simple. Since the offensive was first agreed to there had been three happenings of major importance, the German retreat, the Russian collapse and the entry of the United States into the war. Did not these events, unforeseen when the plan was settled, require that it should be reviewed and possibly fundamentally remodelled? Did they not call for a re-examination of all the factors affecting the conduct of the war?

Monsieur Painlevé went over all the objections to and criticisms of the Commander-in-Chief's plan suggested to him by the Group Commanders. He did not conceal his knowledge of the doubts and anxieties in the minds of many of those who would have to carry out

the attack, and he read out the memorandum given him by M. de Freycinet. His own impression was, he said, that most responsible officers thought the attack was insufficiently prepared and the rate of advance prescribed too rapid.

General Nivelle listened with comprehensible and growing impatience to the Minister's oration, which was nothing less than an indictment by his own subordinates of his plan and methods. As soon as Painlevé had finished speaking Nivelle answered him. While dealing with the criticisms that emanated from his subordinates his tone was extremely bitter. Then, gradually recovering the superb confidence he always displayed when talking to politicians, he brushed aside all the arguments the Minister had advanced. He was, he said, absolutely certain of victory. Really, he was not a child; did anyone believe he could capture the third and fourth German positions without having gained possession of the first two? As a matter of fact he had these in his pocket and he hoped the matter would not be mentioned again. They would be blown sky high and captured with insignificant losses. As for the objections put forward so irregularly by officers under his command, to which the Minister had alluded, he refused to discuss them. Of course he was fully aware of the accumulation of German reserves opposite the G.A.R. These, which were shown on all the maps drawn up at the G.Q.G., did not worry him. All he feared, and he repeated this several times, was *le vide*, emptiness. The Gauls of old feared but one thing, that heaven would fall on their heads. General Nivelle had but one apprehension, that the Germans would withdraw before he could pulverize them. The Hindenburg Line was, he asserted, hardly more than sketched out. Air photographs did not deceive. St. Quentin was already half encircled and could be captured in one day. Three days' fighting at the outside, and d'Esperey's and Micheler's Armies would effect their junction north of the Serre: then the strategic pursuit would begin.

General Nivelle was so tranquilly assertive that the Prime Minister and Painlevé, who were only too anxious to be convinced, were more than half reassured. Maginot, following the rôle which had warranted his inclusion at the conference, vigorously upheld the Commander-in-Chief. This big man with his big voice and air of concentrated purpose was not easily gainsaid. It was clear that General Nivelle had obtained a decided ascendancy over his hearers.



One Minister nevertheless broached diffidently the question of effectives. Would it not be wise, he said, to give the Americans time to make their weight felt? Soon no doubt they would be coming over in considerable numbers. Would it not be prudent to play a waiting game till then? From the purely French point of view was it clever to pursue a course that would leave France without an army at the end of the war? Even victories were costly, and already France had no more men. There were only the halt and the maimed left in the depots. Territorial divisions were being transformed into regulars, but this sleight of hand in no way increased the real strength of the army.

To this General Nivelle answered that it would be a long time before American troops arrived in France in any numbers. Meanwhile, if the Germans were left to their own devices, they might withdraw all their forces from Russia and hurl every man they had against the Franco-British line. Although he was in favour of bringing pressure on the Russians to attack, he would not be surprised if they made peace by July. There was therefore no choice but to attack as soon as possible. The same argument held good as regards the Italians. They were reluctant to attack now. What would their reluctance be if the French offensive did not take place and they became thereby exposed to a really dangerous Austro-German onslaught?

These statements cast a decided gloom over the Commander-in-Chief's civilian audience. The slight warmth generated by his optimistic forecast concerning his own operations evaporated. The prospect of an avalanche of Austro-German divisions ready to be hurled against the Allied line in France and Italy was certainly not a cheerful one.

Monsieur Albert Thomas was especially cast down by what General Nivelle had said about Russia. He was a great believer in that country's future, and a short visit there had constituted him an authority on the subject amongst his Radical colleagues. Monsieur Briand told me a few months later some of the incidents of his sojourn in St. Petersburg. Not understanding a word of the language, he wept with enthusiasm at all the speeches he heard. Still according to Briand, he took like a duck to water to the national Russian habit of kissing males on the mouth, and on one occasion kissed two hundred popes with unabated zest.

The Commander-in-Chief put the Ministers another poser.

The British were not only willing but anxious to attack. Painlevé could only acquiesce in this. Had the Government reflected, went on General Nivelle, that to postpone the offensive meant forfeiting unity of command under French direction? He reminded Ministers that the arrangement only held good for the present operation. Would they destroy what Monsieur Briand had achieved? To abandon or even to postpone the offensive was to give back his liberty to Marshal Haig.

This was a trump card. From that moment it was clear General Nivelle had won the day.

A few more points, raised rather timidly, he brushed aside in cavalier fashion. When he was asked if good weather conditions were not essential for success, he declared, speaking in a tone intended to underline the futility of raising so obvious a point, that of course troops could not move rapidly except in fine weather, and the essence of his method was lightning rapidity.

Someone else put him a question about losses. He answered that the question need not concern the Government too much, as he would either succeed or fail in twenty-four or at most forty-eight hours. He would carry the first two positions with trifling casualties. He could guarantee this. As for the rest, one thing he had made up his mind about: he would never be a party to initiating another Battle of the Somme.

These words evoked a very responsive echo. No more Somme, that was the idea. Painlevé was reassured, almost convinced. In these circumstances no ir retrievable mistake could, he thought, be made.

As soon as the Commander-in-Chief had finished speaking, Maginot again supported the views he had expressed, and this served further to dispel Painlevé's doubts. After all, General Nivelle was the responsible man and his confidence was magnificent.

'General,' said Painlevé, putting his hand on the map where the plain of Laon extended away to the north beyond the hills held by the Germans, 'if your offensive only resulted in giving us back this vast territory and all it contains, the Government and the country would consider it a great victory and owe you an immense debt of gratitude.'

At this, according to Painlevé's account, General Nivelle smiled and shrugged his shoulders. 'That would be nothing,' he said, 'a poor little tactical victory. It is not for so meagre a result that I have accumulated on the Aisne 1,200,000 soldiers, 5,000 guns

and 500,000 horses. The game would not be worth the candle.'

So the die seemed finally cast. After all, there was a measure of common agreement between the Commander-in-Chief and Generals Micheler and Pétain. The latter did not dispute that the first two positions could be captured provided that the whole long, intricate preliminary programme had been fully carried out and the weather was fine when the armies attacked. A limited success seemed therefore a foregone conclusion, even if General Nivelle's great victory were to prove the mirage Painlevé always half-believed it to be. The Minister gained solace from the Commander-in-Chief's positive pledge that he would not pursue his offensive if it was evident from the outset that he was not likely to break through. And what was the alternative? If the Cabinet vetoed the offensive theirs would be the entire responsibility, for it was clear there was not a general in France who would dare advise such a step. If they took a military decision of such moment they could not avoid following it up with others. What would they do next? Send an army to Italy? How many corps or divisions should it comprise? How pitiful they would look, amateur strategists compelled to carry their action to its logical conclusion.

If things went wrong, and how could they not, Ministers would be execrated as the fools who lost the war. They would be accused of having betrayed the interests of the country which had been entrusted to them.

Monsieur Painlevé summed up the views of the Government as follows. The Commander-in-Chief had the Cabinet's sanction to carry out the attacks in the sectors he had chosen, on the day he selected, whenever he was satisfied that his preparations were complete. The Government asked but two things, that under no pretext should the preparatory bombardment of the first two positions be sacrificed to that of the third and fourth, and that the attack should take place under good weather conditions. The conference was over; General Nivelle had won hands down.

There can be little doubt that had the country been aware of the conflict between Painlevé and Nivelle it would have repudiated the Minister with exasperation. Nor would the majority of the Government have supported him. So many hopes had been built on Nivelle, so many expectations centred on his great offensive, that the dismissal of the hero of Vaux and Douaumont would have been fraught with the greatest dangers. On the other hand had

Painlevé himself resigned, this would have been almost as disastrous. Neither the army, in which so many cross currents were perceptible, nor public opinion, could be trifled with at the moment. The situation that had developed, in which politicians and soldiers had become the prisoners of an artificially stimulated popular enthusiasm, is one which men in responsible positions would do well to ponder. Ministers and soldiers were being carried forward pell mell by the irresistible urge of a nation's desire. This frenzy of expectation was not the bellicose enthusiasm of a people longing to get to grips with a detested opponent, but rather the expression of feelings not very far removed from despair. It was the bracing for the final effort of a people weary to death. As a man in dire straits will wring the last ounce of energy from his exhausted limbs if he sees the light of hope ahead, so France was straining for what she was told was the last lap. Her nerves were raw and frayed, her best blood had run out. Her state of mind was not unlike that of those men who under the ordeal of a bombardment stood on the parapet to be shot or ran madly towards the enemy's lines. She had been tortured too long, she must somehow break loose from the rack on which she had been stretched for thirty-two months.

The Ministers knew the mood of the nation. They knew the risk of disillusioning it, and it was with immense relief that they heard General Nivelle accept conditions which, while giving him the opportunity which could not now be denied him, would, they believed, provide a safeguard against irretrievable disaster in case of failure.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE COMPIÈGNE CONFERENCE

THE relief from anxiety which Messieurs Ribot and Painlevé obtained as a result of the conference of April 3rd was of short duration. On the same day the Presidents of the Senate and Chamber visited the different Headquarters of the Armies about to attack. They spoke to a number of highly placed commanders and brought back a very pessimistic impression. This was depressing, and revived doubts which had to a great extent been allayed by General Nivelle; but Ministers would probably not have felt justified in basing a fresh intervention upon these reports, had not their anxieties been revived in the acutest form by a visit from Colonel Messimy, who called on the Prime Minister on the morning of April 5th, and handed him a paper which, he declared, embodied the opinion of the most eminent leaders of the French Army, notably General Micheler.

After emphasizing the difference in the situation before and after the German withdrawal, Colonel Messimy wrote as follows.

The G.Q.G., faced with an entirely new situation, has only made the minimum alterations in its plan . . . As always, and this has been proved in the past, the G.Q.G. is showing complete optimism and colossal powers of self-deception. It is now about to commit a grave error which may have irreparable consequences for France. In the opinion of many of those who will have to carry out the attacks, but especially in the opinion of the Commanders themselves, the forthcoming operations can only have a restricted tactical result. We shall certainly capture guns and prisoners, but only at the price of the heaviest sacrifices, and we shall not obtain any strategical result whatever, for we shall not conquer a strip of more than ten or twenty kilometres in depth. The Germans will bring up their reserves and stop us dead.

Colonel Messimy then pointed out the danger of an attack in the Trentino and the necessity of sending eight Anglo-French divisions to that front immediately.

The document went on:





(top) PÉTAIN  
(bottom) FRANCHET D'ESPEREY

MANGIN  
MICHELER

In fact it appears clearly:

(a) That the forthcoming French offensive, if launched now, will only obtain very meagre results and will, if pressed home as the G.Q.G. intends to press it, cost us extremely heavy losses. The country has no more men to replace those who form the magnificent but the last armies of France.

(b) That the *illuminati* at the G.Q.G., basing their illusions upon the authority of a few energetic but short-sighted Commanders [Mangin was clearly meant], refuse to perceive that the German reserves are such that no strategic manoeuvre that would really pay is possible on the front of attack selected.

(c) That by launching an offensive at the beginning of this cold and wet spring our losses by enemy fire will be increased by a quarter, a third or perhaps even more.

The masses to be moved by the G.A.R. are such [1,200,000] that a great many men will have to remain constantly in the open. This point is so obvious that it needs no emphasizing.

(d) That without having any resources in man-power at our back we are going to engage the French Army in April in a formidable operation which will probably be without issue: as a result, when the fine weather, favourable to major operations, sets in, we shall be unable to maintain our effort owing to lack of men.

The most urgent conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is that forthwith, without the loss of an hour, orders should be issued to postpone the operations in France until good weather can be relied upon.

The report concluded:

As for myself, I am deeply disturbed to see that, faced by an entirely new situation, the G.Q.G. has merely proved capable of patching up an old plan which under present conditions can only be said to be founded upon illusions. I therefore think it my duty to address to the Government in the most urgent and formal manner the following request:

As a Deputy, as a former Minister for War, and as a leader responsible for the lives of 10,000 men [he commanded the infantry of the 46th Division (Tenth Army)] I demand that the Government, before the operations begin, should consult with and hear the opinions of the Group Commanders, either separately



or together, beginning with the one who will lead the French Armies to the attack, General Micheler.

(Signed) MESSIMY<sup>1</sup>

This clearly stated opinion, set out in the form of a memorandum addressed to the members of the War Cabinet, was backed by the eloquent personal appeal of its author, whose position in the hierarchy of the French Army was unique. A trained soldier who had been through the Staff College, he had been Minister for War at the outbreak of hostilities and it was he who had ordered Joffre to send three Corps to defend Paris, a measure without which the Battle of the Marne could not have been fought. Since then he had distinguished himself at the head of a brigade of *chasseurs*.

I had often met him during the Somme, and had a high opinion of him as a gallant, optimistic officer who loved the men he led and was loved by them in return. In those days he inhabited a dug-out in a bank giving on to a nasty little gully which was a particularly unpleasant shell-trap. He was wounded there but refused to leave his command.

Big, round-faced, bushy-moustached and fair, he would peer into your face at one moment with a short-sighted stare, then stand back as if he could only get a complete picture by comparing a close-up with a distant view. Then he would laugh and wipe his pince-nez. Never were glasses more frequently polished.

I used to like listening to him, for it was refreshing to hear broad-minded, tolerant views expressed with urbanity and culture against the background of that shell-pocked depression. He had a varied experience and knowledge which gave him vision far beyond that of the average military man.

His intervention was of course highly irregular from a military point of view, but it may be advanced that as a Deputy it was not only his right but also his duty to give important information to the members of the Government to whom he had access. Some no doubt will say, and with reason on their side, that no man should have two loyalties. The officer should eliminate the Deputy, or the Deputy should not attempt to play the part of a soldier, but the fact

<sup>1</sup> Messimy based his report on a conversation he had had with General Micheler, but when dealing with the advisability of sending troops to Italy he failed to develop Micheler's main argument as to why this was desirable. Quite apart from his fear of an Italian collapse if that country were strongly attacked, Micheler believed that powerful support for Italy would lead to the defection of the Austrians. Such a result, he said, would palliate the Russian downfall. When this occurred an offensive in France would yield very considerable results.

remains that a man of feeling, when he considers that the interests of his country are at stake, will throw over precedent and discipline and proclaim the truth as he sees it.

After visiting the Prime Minister, Colonel Messimy called upon his successor in office and showed him his report. Monsieur Painlevé was horror-struck and decided to inform the President.

The First Magistrate of the Republic had had a busy morning. He had taken the chair at a meeting of the War Committee at which General Foch was urged by Ministers to start for Italy immediately (he left that night) to establish a plan of co-operation with Cadorna. It was settled in principle that four British and four French divisions should be sent to Piedmont, but if any steps were taken to inform the British Government of this decision I am not aware of them.

Monsieur Poincaré had also drawn up a long telegram to President Wilson. Then he had had to arbitrate in a dispute between the President of the Chamber and the Prime Minister, both of whom wanted to make a speech on the subject of the United States's entry into the war. The trouble was they both wanted to speak first. His success in arranging this question, and the hope engendered by the prospect of American support, together with the pardonable satisfaction, reflected in his *Memoirs*, at having found the *mot juste* to express the feelings of France in his message to the American President, led Poincaré to contemplate other problems with a certain indulgent detachment. He was not inordinately impressed by what Painlevé told him. On the other hand he strongly disapproved of the vacillation and hesitations of the Government. When Painlevé once more summarized the objections to the Nivelle plan and said that everyone seemed to be of opinion that the attacks should be postponed until the weather was finer, Poincaré answered dryly that such apprehensions did not correspond with what General Nivelle himself had told him. He had gathered that any considerable delay would give the Germans the initiative and the opportunity of completing the devastation of the country. He was strongly supported by Admiral Lacaze and Monsieur Thomas, but Messieurs Ribot and Painlevé remained doubtful as to the wisdom of undertaking the offensive at all.

After considerable discussion two facts emerged clearly, incapable of being conjured away by phrases; firstly that there was a grave conflict of military opinion, and secondly that in view of this conflict the responsibility for taking a decision rested in the last resort with

the Government, and from this responsibility it could not escape.

It was decided that the question of the offensive must be thrashed out once more and settled finally, and that the War Committee, headed by the President, should go to Compiègne and hold a Council there next morning. It was Poincaré who took the initiative of this step, and he did so with a view to helping the Commander-in-Chief. He thought the suggested meeting would clear away once and for all the innuendoes and criticisms of which he felt General Nivelle was the victim. He was supported in this view by both Albert Thomas and Admiral Lacaze, who believed it would be disastrous to delay the offensive and leave the initiative to the enemy, courting, as Thomas put it, another Verdun. The Admiral thought the German activity proved that they would attack soon if given a free hand. He was fully prepared to support the Commander-in-Chief if he could prove that the conditions for the attack were favourable.

If the proposed conference suited General Nivelle's backers, it appeared to Painlevé as an un hoped-for opportunity of forcing the Commander-in-Chief to face the criticisms of the Group Commanders before his own colleagues and the President. Ministers would then be free to form their own conclusions and would be forced to assume the responsibility of taking a decision with all the facts before them. He accordingly telephoned in the late afternoon to the Commander-in-Chief to inform him of the Cabinet's decision and to request him and his Group Commanders to attend the meeting. By Monsieur Painlevé's orders, an officer on his Staff telephoned to the Group Commanders and told each one personally that it was the desire of the Prime Minister and the Minister for War that they should express their views with complete freedom and frankness.

This was not the first time such a Governmental intervention had taken place. On August 11th, 1915, Monsicur Millerand, then Minister for War, presided for part of the time at least at a conference of Army Group Commanders held at Chantilly, which had been called to discuss the conditions under which the offensive intended to be launched in the autumn should be carried out. It was then laid down that the attack should only take place after the permission of the Government had been obtained.

While the Presidential train was approaching Compiègne on the morning of April 6th, I was making what speed I could towards the same destination. I was in a great hurry, for Colonel Desticker had

sent for me early that morning from the Third Army where I happened to be. He had said: 'A conference is to be held at Compiègne at 10 o'clock. Poincaré will preside. The War Committee has ordered the Group Commanders to be present. Sir Douglas Haig has been asked to come at 12 noon.' Desticker said he had every reason to believe the Government would suggest that the offensive should be put off. He thought this proposal would be supported by Generals Micheler and Pétain. There was a strong possibility that General Nivelle would be overruled and that Sir Douglas would arrive to be faced by a *fait accompli*.

This news filled me with consternation as I thought of the British offensive now irretrievably engaged. As I drove I suffered from a double sense of exasperation, for the car I was in, a worthy successor to one which, two days before, had with its steering gear damaged sent me flying into a ditch, broke yet one more spring so that its speed was reduced to a crawl. Our transport service seemed incapable of supplying British cars that would stand the abominable roads of the war zone.

It seems foolish, no doubt, that such a trivial thing as a broken spring should be as preoccupying as the very vivid picture I had in mind of what would occur if the British attacks were unsupported. I knew full well that although the curtain had not yet lifted on the impending drama, the great orchestra of 2,880 guns had played the overture, the final bombardment was now in full progress, and a continuous stream of steel and explosives, 88,000 tons every four days, was being poured on to the German lines on the Arras front. It was evident that to break the rhythm at this stage might ruin this awe-inspiring performance, turn a magnificent effort into yet one more useless butchery, and without purpose churn yet more acres into fields of blood-soaked horror. All this I was aware of, but that broken spring was as exasperating as interfering politicians, for in this war, as I suppose in all others, small matters jostled great ones as coequal partners in the average human mind.

As soon as I arrived at Compiègne I saw General Wilson, who had heard nothing about the proposed conference. I asked whether Sir Douglas Haig was coming and was told not. He had been asked to luncheon but had declined. He had met General Nivelle the previous day and had agreed to postpone his attack for twenty-four hours, that is until the 9th.<sup>1</sup> He had also

<sup>1</sup> See page 328.

agreed to a corresponding postponement of the French attacks. In these circumstances, and not having been told about the conference or of any special reason why he should go to Compiègne, he had decided that it would be a waste of time to undertake the long journey.

General Wilson sent General Clive over to see d'Alenson to try and get confirmation of my story. That potentate, Clive told us on his return, was apparently quite unperturbed and nonchalant in the extreme. Yes, there was a conference going on at the moment, he said, but Clive could take it from him that as long as General Nivelle remained Commander-in-Chief no limitation would be placed on the offensive. What was more he did not expect that any attempt would be made by Ministers to interfere. The conference had in fact been called to give its blessing to General Nivelle's plan. The only new thing that had occurred was that General Micheler had asked that his attack should be put off a day, so that it would not take place on Friday 13th.

After General Clive had given us this information, we sat and waited, General Wilson moving about the room like an immense grasshopper. He soliloquized as he went. The Hindenburg Line was not completed yet. The frocks (his name for politicians) dreaded a *bataille d'usure*, a battle of attrition. The way to get it was to give the Boches time to reinforce their line. The new German divisions that had appeared on the front had no cohesion yet. Now was the time to attack them.

Suddenly he stopped, put his cap on back to front, bent low as if about to pounce, and declared: 'I am going to the conference. I shall jump in at them from the door, they will take me for a Boche and be frightened out of their lives', and he made as if to hide under the table. 'That will do the trick.' He stood up again, his incredibly ugly face wreathed in smiles. 'It would do them good to be really scared. Painlevé's eyes will pop out of his head for good. As for Ribot, the old vulture, he will flap his great arms and fly away.'

'And Poincaré?'

'Poincaré will sit still and spit like a weasel'; he chuckled and guffawed loud and long, waves of sound coming from the bottom of his deep chest. The Head of the British Mission at the G.Q.G. had put himself into a good temper. Nothing amused him so much as such little comedies in which he filled all the parts. Sniffing intrigue, he was stimulated, amused and amusing.

A moment later he was serious again. The French simply could not put off the offensive, he said. They would in the first place have to obtain the consent of the British Cabinet.

We waited.

Meanwhile what was to be one of the most celebrated conferences held during the war was taking place in the Presidential train drawn up in a siding in Compiègne station. It has been my endeavour to reconstruct that historical scene. Concerning some incidents that took place in the course of it there can be no doubt whatever, for although no minutes were kept the corroborative evidence is completely convincing. The truth concerning others is, on the other hand, much more difficult to ascertain. When there are different versions I have given them. A great deal of evidence has convinced me that quite inevitably, especially when things go wrong and responsibility is heavily engaged, there is hardly a human being who will not endeavour to give the most favourable interpretation to his past words and actions. This is especially true when, as in this case, much of the evidence was written after subsequent events had taken place. With this in mind I have attempted to give an account of what happened as I myself evoke the scene, discarding the most omniscient prophecies and the wisest forecasts claimed to have been made at the conference and recorded some months later, whenever intimate knowledge of the men and the circumstances has led me to doubt whether the words were really uttered at the time. I saw the members of the conference leaving the train after it was over, I spoke to some of them that afternoon and noted what they said. These notes and the accounts of eye-witnesses I have also used, but I cannot in every case give my sources, as some of them are private letters and papers which cannot yet be published.

Soldiers and statesmen assembled at 10 a.m. in the large Presidential drawing-room coach. In a small adjoining compartment, orderly officers and those not admitted to the actual conference waited. They were General Hallouin, Colonel Fournier, two orderly officers, one of whom was the Commander-in-Chief's A.D.C., Captain Guillaume, and Major Helbronner. They played bridge.

On the other side of the partition, the President opened the proceedings by asking everyone to be seated. He had on his right

Monsieur Ribot, on his left General Nivelle. General d'Esperey took his place between General de Castelnau and Monsieur Albert Thomas. General Micheler sat opposite. Monsieur Painlevé, Admiral Lacaze and General Pétain were farther down the table. General Pont, the Chief of Staff, was also present. As has been said, no minutes or notes were taken.

According to Painlevé, the atmosphere in which the discussion began was very strained and gloomy. This was not to be wondered at. Ministers had left Paris under grey skies, and the bitter air, promising more snow, evoked a picture of hundreds of thousands of men out in the open assembling even now for the great assault. Their fate lay in the hands of the little group of dark-clad civilians in the train, who were not exhilarated by the consciousness of their responsibility; nor had the President helped to dispel the prevailing dejection during the journey, for he had turned on Painlevé and reproached him with asperity for having sent messages direct to Generals Pétain and d'Esperey concerning the forthcoming conference. He should only have communicated with them through the Commander-in-Chief, said the President. The Minister did not receive this charge without protesting, and countered by saying that he had found out that General Nivelle was communicating direct with foreign Governments through the Military Missions, and was dealing through these channels with matters quite outside the scope of his functions. This, said Painlevé, must be stopped.

There had remained a distinct coldness in spite of Ribot's attempts to pour oil on the troubled waters by diverting the conversation to political channels. He was delighted with what had happened in the Chamber of Deputies on the previous day. His colleagues might look upon the sitting as the equivalent of a fresh vote of confidence. Parliament was adjourned until May 22nd; that was a great relief. With this conclusion at least all the Ministers were able to agree cordially.

Monsieur Painlevé has left it on record that it was evident from the moment the conference opened that General Nivelle, unaware of what had occurred on the two previous days, was under the impression that the conference was being held on Painlevé's sole initiative, in agreement with if not at the instigation of the Group Commanders.

General Micheler, according to several witnesses, appeared nervous

and ill at ease. General Pétain on the other hand was quite impassive, presenting an exterior of ice as he always did upon formal occasions.

Painlevé was fussed and bellicose, and the other Ministers were manifestly uncomfortable, acutely conscious of how anomalous it was to be sitting discussing the Commander-in-Chief's plans before his subordinates. The Prime Minister alone had an appearance of detachment, looking like a great, beaked, stooping bird, scanning with mild interest the tops of his colleagues' heads.

As for the President, his manner was tense. Short and precise, with a metallic voice and a tone cultured to the point of pedantry, he looked as if he felt himself physically laced into the strait-jacket of constitutional precedent he found so irksome, weighed down by the *ersatz* responsibility he wielded, and exasperated by the mirage of power which was all he possessed. He appeared to lack assurance and to be full of misgivings. It naturally fell to him to preside, and he does not seem to have been able to give any very definite direction to the debate or to have controlled the discussion.

In a letter addressed by General d'Espèrey to General Brugère on September 10th, 1917 (the latter had been placed at the head of a commission charged with investigating the whole question of the offensive) he described the proceedings as being very confused, for 'no one directed the discussion'. D'Espèrey declared that as far as he was concerned 'he had looked upon the meeting as being called merely for the purpose of exchanging ideas', since the soldiers had not had a chance of thinking out the problem under discussion or of collecting the material necessary to support their arguments. He was confirmed in this opinion when he observed that no one was making any notes of what was being said and decided.

Monsieur Painlevé, in a memorandum written shortly afterwards, the main part of which was reproduced in a number of the review *La Renaissance*, published in November 1919, affirmed that 'the President of the Republic opened the discussion by saying that the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, the Russian Revolution and the intervention of the United States constituted fresh facts which might be of a nature to modify the general plan of operations undertaken on the Western Front. He then asked the Minister for War to explain the Government point of view'.

While not in the least wishing to cast any doubts on M. Painlevé's veracity, for I always considered him a very honest man, I cannot



help feeling that in retrospect he visualized the scene with a slight bias in favour of the theory he was defending. Not only does his account not mention the President's reproaches during the journey to Compiègne, but he appears to wish to imply that Monsieur Poincaré adopted his thesis, since he states that the President opened the conference by outlining it. This was certainly not the case. All the evidence, including the President's own diary, proves without possibility of doubt that he was on the side of the Commander-in-Chief upon this occasion and highly disapproved of Governmental intervention in military matters.

If the President spoke at any length at this stage and summarized the views of the Government, he must certainly have made it clear that he was not expressing a personal opinion. I think that the account given me from another source, that Poincaré confined himself to calling upon Painlevé (with Ribot's consent) to explain the point of view of the Government, is a more likely version of what occurred. It is certain that early in the proceedings Painlevé did voice the doubts of some members of the Government, in much the same terms as he had used on April 3rd. There could be no question, he said, of Cabinet intrusion in the actual execution of operations of which the Commander-in-Chief had the sole charge; but the Government was responsible for the general conduct of the war: for this reason it was important that before attempting to carry out a great offensive on which the fate of the country might well depend, any new circumstances arising should be discussed between the Government and the Commander-in-Chief.

The conditions considered essential by the Chantilly Conference of November 1916 and by General Nivelle himself had not been fulfilled because of the German withdrawal and the paralysis of Russia, which had entailed Italian inactivity. On the other hand the intervention of the United States gave the Allies the certitude of being able to last out. Finally, said the Minister, the state of the depots, failing every other consideration, forbade any waste of manpower, especially in what remained to France of her more youthful classes. Only these could be relied upon in an offensive. In his opinion the last reserves of France should not be hazarded on a throw of the dice. It was in any case essential that the army should not suffer irreparable losses out of proportion to the results obtained.

The President then invited General Nivelle to speak. There are several accounts of what he said, including that of the French Official

History, and I have several unpublished papers on the subject. One member of the conference noted that he spoke without referring either to maps or documents — 'exactly like a journalist speaking to other journalists'.

He began by saying that he was extremely glad to hear that the Government recognized its responsibility for the conduct of the war, all the more so since he had understood that the Minister for War had intended to send him a letter demanding that he should assume entire responsibility for the offensive. As he had not received this letter he need not refer to it further. Then, as on April 3rd at the War Office, he summarized his plan and confidently emphasized his certainty of success, but upon this occasion his voice and manner revealed both impatience and irritation. 'The offensive alone can give victory; the defensive spells defeat and shame.' Referring not to the Minister's speech but to the doubts previously expressed concerning his assumption that the first two enemy positions would be captured without hitch or delay, and the imprudence of basing his whole plan on this assumption, he declared in a tone tinged with exasperation that he had been tendered quite childish advice on this subject. Then, according to Painlevé, he complained about the Freycinet Report which had been read to him on the 3rd and which he had then listened to with the utmost calm. Now he objected bitterly that he had been forced to listen to the 'lucubrations of some reserve officer or other.'

He went on to say that never had a more powerful attack been prepared on so wide a front. Never had a greater mass of material been accumulated, never had the morale of the troops been raised to a higher pitch. The army and the nation were both eagerly looking forward to the attack. To abandon it would cause a grave reaction. He then dwelt upon the dangers of delay. Russia, it was clear, was the prey of a revolution; by not attacking, the Entente would allow Germany to throw all her weight upon Russia and force her to accept a separate peace, and peace with Russia would liberate the Austrian and German armies now fixed on her front. The offensive in France might save Russia. All the available hostile forces now in the east would be drawn to the Western Front, thus giving the Provisional Government and the Russian Army breathing space. He also said that he considered circumstances in France were so favourable that Russian and Italian inaction did not greatly disquieten him. As far as Italy was concerned, her plans depended upon what

happened in France. She believed herself threatened in the Trentino. She might conceivably attack on the Carso if, but only if, she were convinced that the Franco-British armies were retaining the major portion of the enemy forces by their attacks in France. The really important point to remember was that the retreat to the Hindenburg Line had liberated more French than German divisions. As for the United States, their effective collaboration was still in the remote future. To await the arrival of American troops would mean renouncing all hope of ending the war in 1917. Then, said General Nivelle, the submarine attacks were now at their height. Could France rely much longer upon receiving the raw material without which she could not prosecute the war? He gave it as his opinion that time, which hitherto had served the Allies, was now favouring the Central Powers. His main argument was of course that if the Allies renounced the offensive they would allow the initiative to pass into the hands of the Germans; in that case where would they employ the 43 divisions identified behind their front, he asked? In his view the inevitable conclusion was that the risks run by not attacking were infinitely greater than those entailed by an immediate offensive.

As for the conduct of the battle itself, he could not accept the principle that either its success or the exploitation of that success should be limited beforehand. To have all your forces available, he argued, did not mean that they would all be engaged at once. It was precisely in order to direct the battle and win it that it was necessary to keep the maximum forces in hand. He felt persuaded that the German front would be broken. If his previsions were justified he would have at his disposal the means of exploiting the success which on previous occasions had so often been absent at the critical moment. A certain risk, however, could never be completely excluded. It was a matter for the Government, on which rested the responsibility for the general conduct of the war, to decide whether the present state of Russia or the entry of the United States into the war created new factors of a nature to modify the policy resolved upon at the Chantilly Conference. He reminded Ministers that the decisions then taken were confirmed by the London and Calais Conferences.

What was it that was feared? Here General Nivelle addressed himself to Monsieur Painlevé. A check and severe losses? But his attack was a matter of twenty-four hours. At this Painlevé expressed surprise and dissent. 'Well, forty-eight hours', conceded Nivelle.

If at the end of forty-eight hours, he went on, the enemy lines were not broken through, the only thing to do would be to call the attack off. If the first onslaught failed, the advantage of numbers and surprise would be lost. It would then merely be a question of matching strength against strength, of getting men killed for nothing. And he repeated twice with great emphasis — 'I will not, under any pretext, get involved in another Battle of the Somme.' 'But', he added, 'we know the enemy's morale is very low and that he will not stand.'

General Nivelle had finished. His concluding words were that 'when he knew the Government's decision he would take, in so far as he personally was concerned, whatever course he deemed proper'.

I believe this to be a fair summary of his long exposition.

Monsieur Poincaré told the Government Liaison Officer, Commandant Herbillon, after the conference, that General Nivelle had spoken of taking 200,000 prisoners.

At the secret session of the Chamber on June 29th, 1917, a Deputy named Albert Favre made a speech giving an account of what had occurred. According to him, General Nivelle answered Monsieur Painlevé with violence. 'I shall succeed. I am convinced of it. The break-through is a certainty. The strategic exploitation of the break-through is beyond dispute.'

But this was a speech, an attack on the Government, a parliamentary oration, a French parliamentary oration delivered after the event by one who was not himself present at the scene he described.

It seems that after the Commander-in-Chief had finished speaking both Monsieur Albert Thomas and Admiral Lacaze intervened, but there is no trace of what they said or of the line they took. No one seems to remember.

Time was passing. The talk had become desultory and lapsed into moody, brooding silences. The two contrary theses had been stated and stood in stark opposition to each other. No Minister felt qualified to throw the weight of his opinion either on the side of the Minister for War or on that of the Commander-in-Chief. The generals did not speak. In the presence of their Commander they could only give an opinion if asked to do so. General Pétain's colourless face showed no more sign than if it had been carved out of marble. General Micheler looked down at the table and fidgeted. General d'Espèrey was flushed. His impetuous temperament must have found the situation particularly trying.

General de Castelnau sat hunched up, conveying the impression that he held himself outside the debate. But if he was silent he took careful mental note of what was going on, for the evidence he gave before the Brugère Commission was by far the most accurate and complete.

At last the President turned to General Nivelle and asked him if he had any objection to his subordinates being asked to give their opinions. All the soldiers present felt the irregularity of their position, and two of them told me later that the President's request showed abysmal ignorance of the military mind, for how could an officer discuss his superior's plans in his presence and that of others?

General Nivelle answered the President that, as the generals were to be questioned in his presence, military discipline would be respected, and he therefore did not object. This was a barely veiled criticism of Painlevé for his interviews with Pétain and Micheler.

General de Castelnau was questioned first. He answered that, having just returned from Russia, he did not really know the situation. Nevertheless he thought that if the Government recognized the necessity of assuming the offensive, the Commander-in-Chief should be allowed to carry out the operation he had planned. In his opinion all the means available should be concentrated upon the decisive point. General Nivelle, having heard the opinions of members of the Government, would no doubt give them full consideration.

It was then General d'Esperey's turn. The Commander-in-Chief had stated, he said, that the enemy would not stand. The former no doubt possessed means of forming an opinion not available to him (d'Esperey), but his experience, and he could only base his opinion on that, led him to expect quite serious resistance. Taking into account the opposition encountered by his Group of Armies in following the Germans to the Hindenburg Line, he laid particular emphasis on the difficulties which must inevitably be encountered in the second phase of General Nivelle's plan, the exploitation of the success. He explained some of the problems he had had to deal with in crossing the devastated area, and warned his hearers of the resistance the enemy could put up when so minded. His deduction was that it would be a mistake to expect too much of the forthcoming operations. He then spoke of the British, and so far as the written records go, he was the only person present to remember that they were already involved beyond recall. The support of the British

having been obtained for a given date, he said, something at any rate should be done: they should not be abandoned at the very moment of their attack. (In his letter to General Brugère dated 10.9.17, General d'Esperey states that he said 'the support of the British having been obtained after much trouble'. These words are only explicable if he was referring to the original trouble at the Calais Conference.)

There is a conflict of evidence as to who spoke next, but Monsieur Painlevé, who wrote his account soon after the event, declared it was General Micheler, and he may be assumed to be correct. It is not easy to establish what the latter actually said, but there is no doubt that the strained relations between the Commander-in-Chief and himself were painfully evident. According to Monsieur Painlevé the dialogue between them was extremely bitter. General Nivelle was at a great advantage. Not only was he the Commander-in-Chief, but he evidently felt an immense moral superiority over his subordinate, whom he believed to have been disloyal, and his manner was tinged with contempt. He may have welcomed this opportunity of bringing the Commander of the G.A.R. to book before his peers. General Micheler must have felt his situation acutely, for, to quote Painlevé again, he was pale and nervous. Nor can his mind have been as clear and brilliant as usual nor his expository powers as great, for not only did he please no one but he seems to have failed utterly to explain his position and his views. He only succeeded in taking some of his hearers completely aback while others were filled with disdain, believing him to have recanted at the eleventh hour.

He was indeed in a quandary. His conduct since he had lost faith in the offensive had certainly not been heroic, and in so far as he had bitterly criticized General Nivelle and his plan without openly and frankly objecting to the Commander-in-Chief himself, he was blameworthy. His consciousness of this may account for his attitude and the obscurity of his exposition, and also for the fact that there are several versions of what he said. Monsieur Painlevé wrote that General Micheler 'declared it was necessary to attack, and that as soon as possible.' It can readily be understood how surprised the Minister was to hear this, but he seems to have been certain that this was what Micheler said, for he was at pains to find reasons for his *volte-face*, which he attributed to nervousness engendered by the Sapigneul attack of the previous day, of which the Government knew nothing at the time. I can find no confirmation that General

Micheler made such a statement. No one besides Monsieur Painlevé either noted it or remembered his having made it.

His next utterance seems to have caused general surprise and disappointment. It was interpreted differently by the various members of his audience. According to Painlevé, Micheler expressed the opinion that the two first enemy positions could be captured at the first onslaught, and perhaps the third and fourth in the course of the two following days, but that this was not likely and his troops would be exhausted by then. Monsieur Poincaré's version is that General Micheler said he was practically certain to capture the first two positions in twenty-four hours. He was less certain concerning the others, which might require three or four days; that there would in any case be a tactical success was certain.

This was a far more sanguine view than either the Minister or the Group Commanders had expected from him. Whatever he actually said, there is no doubt that the latter, who through their liaison officers had heard so many echoes of Micheler's pessimistic views concerning the whole operation, were greatly taken aback. They gained the impression that he was abjuring his declared opinions.

The clash all had expected between the Commander-in-Chief and Micheler came over the question of the break-through. The French Official History states that Micheler gave it as his opinion that the first two positions could be carried, but that he was extremely doubtful of the possibility of a break-through, because the bombardment of the third and fourth positions could not take place under good conditions and they would probably not be captured.

Some bitter words were exchanged between Micheler and Nivelle, none of which, happily perhaps, was recorded; but the former stubbornly held to his statement that the full mission assigned to him could not be carried out. He, however, completely failed to convey to his audience, even after Poincaré had intervened several times and put a number of questions, what was in his mind, namely that although in his opinion circumstances had profoundly modified the basis of the original plan, the situation was such that the attack should nevertheless take place without delay owing to the dangerously exposed position of the attacking troops and artillery. Only in one matter did he make his meaning clear: there was no doubt that he had no faith whatever in the break-through.

The dispute went on for some time, but General Nivelle had the last word. 'I will put General Micheler two questions', he said. 'Did you agree to the plan of attack you have been asked to carry out? Did you receive the material and troops you applied for?'

These direct questions, which could only be answered in the affirmative, seem to have nonplussed Micheler. He might have said simply that circumstances had changed, but he may have thought he would then lay himself open to an equally direct question as to why he had not made this view clear at an earlier stage. This is pure surmise, the only recorded fact being that the men sitting round the table noted Micheler's embarrassment and discomfiture. So marked was this that the President, evidently concluding that any answer given would only lead to renewed and even more bitter recriminations, somewhat hurriedly asked General Pétain to give his opinion.

The Commander of the G.A.C. then made in his clear, incisive, low voice, every sentence cut out as if by a chisel, the indictment of the offensive. He was even more emphatic than General Micheler had been on the impossibility of a break-through. 'We have not the means to carry it out', he said. 'Even if it were to succeed we could not exploit it. Have you 500,000 fresh troops to make good such an advance? No. Then it is impossible.' According to Painlevé, he went on to say that the hope of getting beyond the second German position was chimerical. That position might, however, be taken if the attack was well prepared and if the weather was fine, but it would be costly.

All agree that the atmosphere of the conference was now electric. According to Albert Favre, General Nivelle interrupted General Pétain violently, brutally, preventing his summarizing his conclusions. According to others, he repeated once more several of the arguments he had already used. His tone was high and excited. Then, suddenly placing his hand on his chest, he declared: 'Since I am in agreement neither with the Government nor with my own subordinates, the only course open to me is to resign.'

According to the report of the secret session of the Chamber on June 29th, Monsieur Poincaré, hearing this, turned towards General Nivelle and exclaimed: 'General, you have the confidence of the Government. There can be no question of your resigning.' It is quite certain that all the Ministers joined in protesting against the Commander-in-Chief's resignation. Painlevé distinctly says



so. The members of the Government, he writes, declared: 'Resign on the eve of a great battle? There is no question of resigning, but of coming to an agreement.'

At one moment, General Nivelle got up and was surrounded by Poincaré, Ribot and Painlevé, all trying to calm him.

When they had resumed their seats, the President summarized the discussion. There are at least two versions of what he said. General de Castelnau's is as follows.

There are three alternatives.

(1) There is the solution of adopting the defensive, of which no one approves.

(2) A decisive battle to be launched with the intention of engaging all the available forces until their exhaustion.

(3) An offensive battle followed by the prudent engagement of the reserves if the enemy's front is broken, and should this result not be achieved and a wide breach not be made in the enemy's lines, the offensive should be called off.

'It is the last solution', declared the President, 'that should be adopted.'

General de Castelnau is not only the soul of honour, but he occupied a very detached position at the conference, so that his statements have particular value. He is also indirectly corroborated by Monsieur Painlevé.

The records of the secret session of the Chamber, on the other hand, give a very different version of the President's conclusions. His actual words as quoted were:

Since there is unanimity on the question of the operation it becomes a military question outside our province. All we have to do is to register a decision.

Perhaps both versions are correct, each statement having been made by the President at a different time during the discussion. The second certainly represents a point of view he held consistently. Ministers should not intervene in military matters; nothing was more dangerous than civilian meddling; the Government might veto the operation but not discuss it.

If the President's conclusions were as given by General de Castelnau, whose evidence cannot be disregarded, there would seem to have been little room for misunderstanding, and there might have been none had the conference ended there.

But General Nivelle spoke again. Either animated by an honesty of purpose that could not abide the thought of there being the least ambiguity as to his real intentions, or displaying a skill of no mean order, he also summarized the conclusions of the conference. Treating these as if they were a mirror, he tilted them, until, instead of reflecting the policy of the War Committee, they gave back the image of his own conception of the offensive from which he had never departed.

According to Painlevé, General Nivelle said that he intended carrying out the attacks with all possible vigour. It was impossible to fight half a battle. It had never been his intention to hazard the fate of France on one throw of the dice. If he had collected 1,200,000 men in the bend of the Aisne, it was in the first place because the greater the strength of the assailant the less costly would be the capture of the objective, and in the second place because this would enable him to exploit with powerful means the eventual break-through. This large force would also permit him to break off the battle in his own time if he deemed it necessary to do so. General Nivelle reasserted that no 'half-battle' should be fought, which certainly meant in his mind that the headlong assault he had planned should be proceeded with, and that the break-through was still the governing object of his whole plan.

In answer to questions put by Ministers, he accepted the principle that, if circumstances demanded, three French divisions should be sent to Italy.

Painlevé seems to have realized that the Commander-in-Chief's last speech reopened the whole question. It was he who recorded the words General Nivelle used, and his comments were plain. He wrote: 'The *directives* remained the same, word for word, as those decided upon at the conference of April 3rd. The divergence of view remained the same. But whatever were the *arrière pensées* harboured by each, all were at least agreed on the importance attached in this case to the word 'initial'. 'Initial and minute preparations by bombardment of the first two positions. Need of a period of fine weather before the attacks begin.'

The Minister was fully aware that the chasm between his conception and that of the Commander-in-Chief remained unbridged, but he was content to cling to the idea that the agreement was that of April 3rd. He attached great importance to what had been settled on that date, evidently hoping that although the decisions

then taken did not appear to have caused General Nivelle to alter his plans in any way, these might prove to be a sheet-anchor if things went wrong. He might then invoke them as a reason for demanding that the offensive should come to an end. He pinned his faith to the formula 'break off if no break-through', which he believed had been accepted by the conference, although he had an uneasy feeling that General Nivelle, by asserting the principle of 'no half-battle' had unobtrusively punctured it. Had he been a soldier he would have realized that his apprehensions were fully justified. 'No half-battle' could have but one meaning, the engagement of the total forces as planned, and this once done there could be neither halt nor turning back. The enemy is never likely to allow his opponent, once he is engaged, to cease to play when it suits him.

Why did he not protest? Because it would have taken a stronger man than he to do so. It is always difficult to insist at any gathering, when a decision of some sort has been arrived at after a heated discussion, that your own personal interpretation of the formula adopted shall be the one accepted by all. Upon this occasion the Minister for War was anything but certain of the support of his own colleagues. Tempers were frayed and nerves exhausted. He, and others too perhaps, realized the possibility of equivocation, but he preferred that risk to reopening the whole subject, which would have caused intense irritation and might have arrayed opinion against himself. Clemenceau would have acted otherwise. He would have brutally interrupted General Nivelle and imposed his will upon all present: but Painlevé was no Clemenceau.

The President declared the proceedings closed. The celebrated Conference of Compiègne was over, its only obvious result a lessening of the authority of the Commander-in-Chief.

It is difficult at first sight to see why a meeting purely negative in its results should have obtained such notoriety. The fact that it brought to a head bitter dissensions and exposed without remedying them deep divergences of opinion, is but a poor claim to a special niche in the fane of history; nor is it for these reasons that the proceedings have attracted so much attention. It is because the Conference of Compiègne stands as a monument to the inefficiency of democracy at war, to the helplessness of Ministers facing technicians, and their total inability to decide between different professional opinions.

The Prime Minister and Painlevé controlled the War Cabinet.

Painlevé ruled the Army. They had the power to override the Commander-in-Chief in whose plan they had no faith; yet they were incapable of pointing out the failings of that plan or suggesting alternatives, impotent even to call a halt. The Cabinet was supreme in name only. It was hobbled by its lack of technical knowledge and fettered by public opinion, which, aware of its ignorance in military matters, would have been intolerant of civil intrusion into the military sphere.

April 6th epitomizes the terrible disability from which democracies, even when fighting for their existence, are unable to free themselves. What this weakness in the supreme direction of the war cost the Allies in lives and money can never be computed.

When the French Chamber heard later what had happened at Compiègne it growled in anger. The whole question came up at the secret session of June 29th. The Deputies perceived at once the unreality of the proceedings and the fact that everything had been left vague under the fiction of an agreement. General Nivelle was particularly severely judged. When they heard that he had tendered his resignation at the conference there were loud cries on all sides of the House — 'It was a threat.' 'Blackmail.' 'What an example to give the men,' etc. Albert Favre was really voicing the opinion of the House when he declared: 'How could a decision have been arrived at so lightly, a decision that engaged the fate of the nation? Ought not the question to have been gone into more thoroughly? Ought not the Ministers to have asked to see the orders? Would they not then have inevitably observed that General Nivelle's conception was so fantastic, such a fiction of the imagination, that they would inevitably have vetoed it?' And, after giving a not inaccurate account of the conference, he concluded: 'Thus was the operation of April 16th decided upon. The responsibility of the members of the War Committee is deeply involved.'

The anger of Parliamentarians did not solve the problem, and the idea put forward by Albert Favre that Ministers should have called for and studied General Nivelle's orders and then negatived them, is absurd. The picture it evokes of these civilians examining plans and maps, and working out the meaning of the vast number of orders based on these, issued by the Army Groups and Armies to the artillery of every description, to the air force, the cavalry, infantry, tanks, etc., is ridiculous; yet without doing this they could not hope to come to a reasoned conclusion. And of course lack

of knowledge would have precluded their grasping the real meaning of that mountain of documents. Only one possessed of that most dangerous of all disqualifications, an amateur's half-knowledge, would have made such a suggestion, or thought it possible that statesmen, innocent of all military training, would have been capable, in the course of an hour or so spent in a railway carriage, of estimating such things as the fire-power on their own side and the power of resistance of the enemy, the weight of the shock of the attacking infantry and its tactical dispositions, without any knowledge of the ground, of assimilating in fact in that short space of time the highly technical staff work which represented many weeks of study by highly trained professionals.

When the Head of the State declared the conference adjourned, the participants filed out. From this moment new evidence becomes available, since generals and statesmen spoke of what had occurred to the members of their Staffs who were anxiously awaiting them.

The President walked out first, looking extremely displeased. It is likely that he was the exception that proves the rule, and spoke to no one. The Commander-in-Chief was very pale; d'Esperey, on the other hand, was scarlet. 'It is settled', declared Painlevé to an official of the Ministry of War. 'Nothing is changed from the decisions taken in Paris on the 3rd. It will be a tactical offensive to start with. The attacks will be broken off in twenty-four hours if the desired results have not been obtained.'

General d'Esperey could not contain his indignation against Micheler. 'He showed lack of character', he said. 'We were amazed: for the last three weeks we have heard nothing but the echoes of General Micheler's criticisms, and now in the presence of the Commander-in-Chief he has nothing to say for himself and proclaims the opposite of what he was saying yesterday.' As for General Micheler himself, he observed to a staff officer who was a friend of his that General Nivelle had spangled his orations with Napoleonic aphorisms.

Presently Ministers and generals trooped back into the train to lunch as the guests of the President. Concerning this meal and what was said at it I know little, but one fact is certain. It was Good Friday, so a double lunch was served, fish only for good Catholics, meat for Radical Ministers. The President excused himself to

General de Castelnau, the booted friar, for this necessary duplication, without which he would certainly have been accused of having fallen under the sway of Rome.

After luncheon the Ministers were taken round the offices of the G.Q.G. Leading the way was Monsieur Poincaré, short, stocky, walking with firm decided steps, turning not his head but his whole body in any given direction. He gave an impression of greyness. Following him came the Commander-in-Chief, giving brief explanations of the functions of each bureau. His icy demeanour together with the fact that, as he introduced the head of each section, he made no attempt to produce any of those neat little stereotyped compliments which are the small change of French politeness, gave their cue to the groups of officers who stood by with wooden faces. The worst rumours rampant at the G.Q.G. since morning were instantly confirmed in everyone's mind. These meddlesome politicians had been making trouble again. Officers from the Ministry of War noted many scowls as they passed in the rear of the procession.

Following the President and the Commander-in-Chief came the Prime Minister, who as he walked appeared to help his progress by gently flapping his immensely long arms encased in the still longer sleeves of his grey overcoat. When he sat down his long bent frame seemed to form an almost complete circle, his magnificent old man's head with its finely chiselled features, hooked nose, sunk dark piercing eyes, silver locks and white beard, seeming to rest on his thin pointed knees. He looked like a scholar, a philosopher, or perhaps even more like Father Time, in no hurry for once.

Behind him came Painlevé, with the air of a dictator not very sure of how the crowd would take his dictates. I feel pretty certain that had the officers of some of the sections been irresponsible citizens instead of disciplined soldiers he would have been hissed, *conspué* according to the graphic French expression whose original Latin meaning is 'all spit together'.

The others followed in a group in which the military onlookers picked out with interest the sleek, long-haired Thomas, shiny hair, shiny beard, shiny glasses, and Admiral Lacaze, who like Ribot reminded one of a bird, but instead of an eagle he evoked the picture of one of the lesser waders. What was he doing in that political *galère*? thought the officers.

Before starting this perambulation Monsieur Ribot found an opportunity to have a private talk with General Micheler. The Commander of the G.A.R. gave it to be understood that the Messimy Note somewhat exaggerated his point of view; he also told the Prime Minister that the attack must take place. It could not be countermanded. 'You are quite sure we ought to attack?' Ribot asked him. 'Yes, otherwise we run the risk of being attacked ourselves; but we ought not to attack in the way we have been ordered to do.' 'I see', said Ribot, 'but you are sure we ought to attack?' 'Yes', answered Micheler.

In his evidence before the Brugère Commission, Micheler stated that he concluded from the fact that the subject was reopened by Monsieur Ribot that 'the members of the War Committee who had been present at the conference had not grasped the difference between the necessity to attack, which was indisputable, and the form the attack should take, of which certain Army Commanders disapproved.' This statement probably gives the clue to the conflicting evidence concerning General Micheler's attitude at the conference. He seems to have realized himself, on thinking the matter over, that he had failed to make clear the difference between the necessity to carry out a tactical offensive, of which he was persuaded, and his complete disbelief in the break-through. His lack of success in this respect was greater than he thought, for in the clash of wills and words between himself and the Commander-in-Chief, even his fellow Commanders had failed to grasp exactly where he stood. That evening Colonel Desticker, after a long talk with his chief, said to me: 'General Nivelle took a strong line at the conference and General Micheler raised no objection to what he said. On the contrary, he declared he would capture the first, second and third positions. The fourth, *mon Dieu*, he would take a little later.' The way Desticker spoke reflected the disappointment and disgust at Micheler's attitude I had already noted in others. It was clear they considered he had failed as a man, in that he had lacked the courage to say to the Commander-in-Chief what he had constantly repeated behind his back, and had failed as a soldier to defend his professional opinion. His attitude was such as to damn him in the eyes of his colleagues. Although he had shown that he did not believe in a break-through, he had been too vocal in his criticism of the plan of attack itself to be pardoned for talking now of an easy conquest of the first German positions.

When the Ministers went to the château, the Group Commanders remained on the station platform. General d'Esperey without more ado strode off and leapt into his car.

'Well', said Pétain to Micheler, 'do you understand what it is all about?' 'No', answered Micheler. 'The only thing to do is to await orders at our own Headquarters. I'm off.' 'So are we', said Castelnau and Pétain. The three drove together as far as Dormans. Micheler declared on the way that he intended asking to be relieved of his command. The other two argued that this was not the right course to take. The Commander-in-Chief could relieve anyone he chose; a subordinate should not take the initiative of such a step.

That evening Micheler wrote the following note to his great friend Monsieur Antonin Dubost, the President of the Senate.

I came back feeling very depressed after this painful discussion, and very much inclined to ask leave to withdraw into obscurity. I have come to the conclusion, however, that on the eve of these events my duty is to remain and to prove that my obedience is independent of my ideas, which no one ought to have doubted. I am convinced that we need a success in France and we shall obtain it in spite of the difficulty of the task in face of an enemy already much reinforced. Afterwards, according to the attitude adopted by the Commander-in-Chief, I shall decide what I ought to do.

The Ministers returned to Paris in a gloomy mood. Even the buoyant temperament of the irrepresible Albert Thomas was compressed to miserable proportions by the general dejection and doubt which weighed on the little band. This was not to be wondered at. Painlevé himself, who had attached so much importance to holding the conference, noted that its only result had been 'to create regrettable friction' amongst the Army Commanders.

That same afternoon a letter from Colonel des Vallières, the Head of the French Mission at G.H.Q., was received at the G.Q.G. It confirmed what Sir Douglas had said on the previous day. 'The artillery preparation of the British First and Third Armies is', he wrote, 'completed. The bombardment was somewhat interfered with by atmospheric conditions, nevertheless G.H.Q. and the Army Commanders fully grasp the value of time and the importance of launching the attack on the appointed day.'

From which it may be inferred, strange as it may seem, that Colonel des Vallières was still living in the atmosphere of the days



when the one fear of the G.Q.G. was that the British would not be ready in time, whereas now the great problem was how to spin out their preparations so as not to dissociate attacks intended to be complementary to each other.

Whether Ministers were informed of this clear indication that the British were ready to fulfil their part and had complete confidence that the French would do theirs, I do not know.

The evening, Painlevé told his *entourage* that he would assure Mr. Lloyd George when he met him on the 9th (it had been arranged that he and Ribot should go to London to confer with the British War Cabinet) that there would in any case be no repetition of the Somme, for the attacks would be discontinued if not immediately successful. At the same time General Nivelle was addressing a telegram to the French Mission in Russia, declaring that he was about to launch his offensive, which was to involve the total strength of the French Army.

The Prime Minister drew Painlevé's attention to this telegram, which he had not felt justified in stopping, but the Minister for War took no action.<sup>1</sup>

On the 7th General Nivelle drew up a letter tendering anew his resignation to the Government, but did not send it, on the assurance of his friend Albert Thomas that he possessed the complete confidence of the Cabinet.

Poincaré sent him a message through Commandant Herbillon, the Government Liaison Officer, assuring him that the Government would see that he was not interfered with during the operations.

Two days later, General Wilson was given General Nivelle's own version of what had occurred at Compiègne, and noted it in his diary.

He told me at once practically what I had heard the day before yesterday, that the Ministers (and there were several) and Pétain urged that the great offensive should be abandoned and only small attacks made. Nivelle listened for some time and then weighed in by remarking that there were so many Commanders-in-Chief that he was confused, but as Commander-in-Chief, he would not tolerate the present state of affairs, and would do as he pleased or resign. This brought them to their senses, and then he added—for the benefit of Pétain and Micheler—that if some French generals would give him the loyal support that Haig was giving it would be a good thing.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXVII (page 580).

So the meeting terminated, but I am quite clear that, if our coming offensive does not succeed or is only moderately successful, the politicians will unload Nivelle. What a scurvy crowd.

I then discussed Foch having been sent to Italy on Thursday. Nivelle said that the War Committee got a sudden scare that Cadorna was not going to hold on, and packed off Foch, without Staff, etc. Nivelle was writing to-day to the War Committee to tell them to bring Foch back and to let him discuss the situation with me, with Haig and Robertson, and then go down decently. The whole thing is a mess.

I have failed to find any confirmation of the statement that the British Commander-in-Chief was held up by General Nivelle as an example for French Ministers to admire, as a paragon whose virtues would shame Generals Pétain and Micheler. In January no one could have foreseen that a few weeks later the French Commander-in-Chief would depict himself speaking of Haig as David spoke of Jonathan.

With regard to General Wilson's remarks about Foch's mission to Italy, we have already seen that Foch left for Vicenza on the night of the 5th. He was back in France by the 15th, and resumed his retirement at Senlis.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE EVE OF ARRAS<sup>1</sup>

HAD the wind been in the north, those sitting in conference at Compiègne could have heard the formidable rumbling of the British artillery at Arras. For two days now it had been hammering at the German lines. If the statesmen had heard, they would perhaps have realized how fully they were committed, how impossible it was to withdraw.

The preliminary bombardment, which had begun three weeks before the attack, cutting wire systematically, searching back areas, destroying trenches and strong points, hammering and pounding, churning and tearing at the German defensive system, entered on its final phase at 4.30 a.m. on April 4th.<sup>2</sup> From that moment British projectiles crashed continuously all along the front of attack, and not only there but at other points, notably in the Ypres sector, our guns belched forth a challenge as if there too we intended to attack.

On the previous day, the 3rd, the enemy had been given a foretaste of what was to come. All the heavy and medium howitzers of the Third Army concentrated their fire for ten minutes on each of the villages within range. The effect was overwhelming, for in several sectors as many as fifty per cent of the heavy and siege guns, which till then had remained silent, suddenly came into action.

Two or three times a complete attacking barrage was put down on the German lines to induce the enemy to man their trenches. This these brave men did, and suffered terrible losses accordingly. When the attack really came the ruse was found to have borne fruit, for some units, believing this to be another deception, failed to stand to.

The enemy put down a counter-barrage, but nowhere did this match the intensity of our fire. The Germans nevertheless managed in most areas to put down a fairly heavy barrage of 4.2's and 5.9's within two minutes of our bombardment.

Their efforts to destroy our observation balloons that festooned the western sky showed how galling our fire was to them. They tried hard to put out these eyes of our guns, but seldom succeeded.

<sup>1</sup> See Map facing page 610.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix XXVIII (page 590).

There had been a suspicion that they had been masking some of their batteries during the winter, and that the intensive bombardment would force them to bring into action any concealed guns they might have, so as to save their positions from destruction. Bearings were taken of gun-flashes, the sound-detection specialists were constantly on the alert, the air service kept careful watch, but the German gun activity did not increase in spite of the merciless pounding. The enemy had clearly nothing up their sleeve. As far as guns were concerned they were outmatched on the Arras front.

During the whole preparatory period there had been great activity in the air, and contrary to what had been the case on the Somme, the Germans undoubtedly had the better of it. It says much for the morale of our men that this fact, generally so depressing to the spirits, did not in the least detract from their confidence; but it says even more for our airmen, who day after day went up to face the unequal struggle. On clear mornings swarms of hostile planes came over our lines, attacking any of our machines they saw. The troops followed these battles with the dogged faith of north-country football fans in their home team. 'Next time our chaps will win through', they declared after every unfavourable encounter. Meanwhile our pilots had a bad time. Navigating machines that were in every way inferior to those of the enemy, they fell easy victims to the small fast German fighters that hung about the clouds at great altitudes, then in groups of two or three, and even seven or eight, dropped like a swarm of hawks on our more clumsy machines.

The German superiority lay not in numbers but in the quality of their aircraft and the greater experience and better training of their pilots. During the preliminaries of the Arras battle we had on the front of the First and Third Armies no less than twenty-five squadrons representing 365 serviceable machines, of which a third were single-seater fighters, against, as we now know, 195 German machines, of which not quite half were equipped for fighting. (On the opening day of the battle, April 9th, the air forces on the front of the First, Third, Fourth and Fifth Armies were 754 British against 264 German machines.)

The main reason why the Germans had on the average better pilots than we had, was that they husbanded their air strength and did not have to throw half-trained men into the fighting line. Nor were they compelled, as our air force was by the Intelligence, to send

out patrols daily over the same points at the same time, useful no doubt but inviting attack and very costly.

Better machines also gave the enemy pilots greater confidence. That confidence was well-founded, since they could break off an engagement at will whereas we had to fight however unfavourable our position. Our disadvantage in this respect was so marked that we were compelled to employ inordinate numbers of machines for every job, thereby dissipating our superior resources. Fifteen aeroplanes in support of three machines operating cameras were not unusual at this period.

A few days before the attack, the position became even worse than before. A formidable team of hostile planes painted red with yellow, red or pink bellies made their appearance. This was Baron von Richthofen's famous circus. His pilots were amazingly efficient and very aggressive. Between April 4th and 8th we lost 75 aeroplanes in action. During the same period 56 of our machines crashed. On April 5th, Captain W. Leefe Robinson, leading six Bristol Fighters, met Richthofen at the head of five Albatross Scouts near Douai. He attacked. Other German fighters intervened in the combat, and only two of our machines got back, one badly damaged. On the 7th six of our Nieuports fought five Albatross Scouts led by Richthofen. Our people hardly got a shot in and only one machine returned undamaged. If honest English curses could have killed, they would have brought down the red bellies under concentrated volleys of invective.

The situation was somewhat relieved by the arrival of the Sopwith machines. No. 3 (Naval) Squadron, equipped with these planes, was engaged in much hard fighting but suffered no casualties. About a week before the attack three machines belonging to this formation appeared in the sky, flying from the direction of Arras. Their appearance was immediately noticed by the troops below. Although they flew very high, much higher than our scouts generally did, there was no glint of red from their wings, and it was noticed that the newcomers represented something new in design. It was impossible at so great a distance to tell whether they were friends or foes. But the red bellies were up too, high in the eastern sky, and made straight for the strangers. In a moment it was apparent that this was no meeting between friends; the two groups engaged in one of those furious dogfights up there in the heavens that made the man on the ground feel so disarmed and helpless. The weather was

fine and clear. There was something so unusual in this encounter that every man on our side watched it with breathless interest. The Germans no doubt were watching too. Friend and foe, hardly distinguishable, were pirouetting and turning in a wild tarantella while very faintly came the crackling of machine-guns like the sparking of a toy electric battery. The fight lasted only a few moments. The leading German machine lost poise and seemed to flutter, then, like a wounded bird falling with outstretched wings, descended in the enemy country. The others turned and fled.

The spell was broken, although such incidents were unfortunately rare. The air offensive was maintained, but at very great cost. In spite of the heaviest casualties the R.F.C. drove the enemy's machines back from the battle area and endeavoured by bombardments to force him to withdraw anti-aircraft guns and aeroplanes from the front. At the same time aerodromes and railway junctions were attacked. This effort and the pluck of our pilots had the effect of persuading our troops that we had regained the mastery of the air, a very important matter. Those responsible knew what a price we were paying, we the greatest industrial country in the world, possessing also the best man-power, for having allowed ourselves to be outstripped in equipment, thus depriving ourselves of the means both of training an adequate number of pilots and of giving those we had a fair chance.

From April 4th onwards the bombardment waxed and waned, rising to a maximum at a different hour each day so as to induce the enemy to believe that zero hour had come at last, and all the time our gallant little trench-mortars busied themselves with wire-cutting under great difficulties, for the Germans hated them with a great hatred and always shelled them whenever they opened fire. The heavy mortars continuously pounded machine-gun emplacements and strong points within range.

The earth about the front line trenches looked like a thing disembowelled. It seemed impossible that any living creature could survive that steel tornado and remain sane under the constant vibration, the never-ending sharp ringing reports of the field guns, the ear-splitting crash of the heavies. These sounds, combined with the reports of the trench artillery, blended at times into one devastating roar that made men lose their sense of balance and feel the ground slipping from under them, as if the world, flung from

its place in the heavens, was being precipitated headlong, sickeningly, into space.

The amount of ammunition fired was terrific. It amounted to five and a half tons per gun daily, compared with three and three-quarter tons fired on the Somme, and we had one gun for every eight yards of front.

So effective was our shelling that, we learned later, the Germans had found it impossible to relieve a number of their units. These had been kept constantly on the alert for eleven days, a heavy strain in itself, but rendered well nigh unendurable by the constant shelling.

The bombardment was interlarded with gas from the new Livens projectors, which were fired electrically hundreds at a time and threw gas drums up to 1200 yards. On April 4th the VI Corps sent over 1500 of these drums. It was learned later that these had killed 460 men in the Blangy area alone.

They were very successful, these gas cylinders, more independent of the wind than the gas cloud, for there was far less danger of the gas drifting back towards our own lines; there was also a far greater element of surprise, for they arrived suddenly in flocks, giving little or no warning and practically no time to put on gas masks, whereas the old gas cloud could easily be seen. Forty tons of gas were thus released, generally against known strong points.

The hurricane of steel that blew continuously from west to east lowered the spirits of the Germans and correspondingly heightened those of our men. Never had they been in better heart, more confident, keener.

They had long realized that something was afoot on the Vimy-Arras front. They had observed the vast stores of shells accumulating beside the roads, and seen the monster guns hiding by day under trees until they could move towards their secret destinations under cover of darkness. The sight of immense wire cages for prisoners tickled their imagination. Evidently the Command was anticipating a big success, and this confidence was echoed in the hearts of those gallant fellows who never doubted their power to achieve all that might be asked of them. No one knew when the attack would take place and few really cared. As for the Canadians, a particular pride seized them when they realized that Vimy Ridge was their objective. They all knew of the heroic efforts of the French to

capture the famous height, and felt elation at the thought that they, the men of the new world, would succeed where those of the old had failed. They were in the best of spirits, happy in the thought that for the first time the four divisions of the Corps were to attack side by side. They would have been astonished and amused had they known that G.H.Q. was much exercised on their account, for Lord Beaverbrook was insisting that more and more publicity be given them because of the good effect this would have in Canada, while Lord Northcliffe, who was in America, sent telegram after telegram pointing out that the belief was growing both in the United States and Canada that the Canadian troops were doing all the work while the British slackened their efforts, and he argued that this was affecting recruiting.

It may have been a combination of circumstances that made the troops, both British and Canadian, so sure of the result, but it is a curious fact, often remarked, that the infantry always had a kind of premonition of whether an attack was going to be a success or not. This time they were quite certain that they would capture the positions opposite and were consequently elated. Curious, this collective feeling, this pleasurable sensation derived solely from confidence in the success of the unit. A moment's thought made it obvious that no individual could be certain that he would be amongst those who would live to get across those few hundreds yards, and if he failed to remember this there were always jokers at hand to ask him if he felt his wings growing. But the idea did not fester; each man thought of himself as part of something that could not die. He felt obscurely that his pals, who could be relied upon to stand by him at the risk of their own lives, would, although missing him if he fell, carry on, and so, somehow, in some unexplained way he would be there, since his spirit formed part of that undying thing, his regiment.

On April 6th the higher formations were informed that the attack, which was to have taken place on Sunday 8th, was postponed for twenty-four hours. That night the infantry of three divisions of the VI Corps, with their R.E.'s and Pioneers, disappeared under the streets of Arras, where food for eight days and pack animals to carry it forward were already installed. It was a strange sight, that ghostly town full of silent marching troops, troops marching above ground, troops marching below.

On Saturday, April 7th, Corps Operation Orders announced that



zero hour would be 5.30 a.m. on the 9th. At 2.30 p.m. that day Sir Douglas Haig, accompanied by General Kiggell and General Allenby, called at General Haldane's headquarters. Kiggell asked him if a postponement of seventy-two hours in the attack would matter. He answered that he was strongly opposed to any further postponement, and a few minutes later the order was given that the attack should take place as arranged on the 9th.

On the same day, April 7th, a suspicion grew that the enemy might be withdrawing in front of Arras. Raids were quickly organized and worked with such dash that in one case at least a raiding party went through our own barrage. They reported that the first and second lines in the German system were not recognizable as trenches.

Counter-battery work began. It had not been started earlier in order not to give the enemy time to replace damaged material. Direct hit after direct hit on hostile guns was reported by our airmen, and the German wire on the front line system, at some points seventy-five and even a hundred yards deep, was pulverized.

The tactical plan of attack consisted in short advances on a series of objectives which corresponded to the enemy's successive lines of defence. These were designated the Black, Blue, Brown and Green Lines.<sup>1</sup>

The Canadians, on the left of the line, had a shorter distance to go than the other corps. Their 4th and 3rd Divisions had a special objective, the Red Line. The 2nd Canadian Division, to which a British brigade was attached, and the 1st, were to capture the Blue and Brown Lines on their front.<sup>2</sup>

There were to be considerable pauses on each objective to allow time both for consolidation and for the organization of the next advance.

The Black Line was to be captured in thirty minutes, and the

<sup>1</sup> The general attack was to take place at 5.30 a.m., but the 24th Division, on the extreme left and beyond the battle line proper, was to attack somewhat earlier to secure the flank of the Canadian attack. The 56th Division on the extreme right was only to attack at 7.45 a.m., as it was calculated that the advance farther north would help it to reduce the extremely strong bastion of Neuville Vitasse which made a salient in our line. Farther south still, the 90th and 21st Divisions were to advance in echelon, their left keeping up with the 56th Division.

As a rough rule, each attacking battalion was to advance on a front of approximately 350 yards, the men extended a few paces apart. The brigade fronts varied greatly as they were to attack on a one, two or three battalion front. The fronts allotted to divisions also varied, ranging from three or four thousand to fifteen hundred yards as between different divisions and their several objectives.

<sup>2</sup> See Map facing page 610.

advance from it against the Blue Line was to take place two hours after zero, i.e. at 7.30 a.m. Forty-four minutes were allowed for the capture of the Blue Line, and here there was to be a pause of nearly four hours (i.e. the attack on the Brown Line was to take place six hours and forty minutes after zero, at 12.10 p.m.).

The Brown Line was to be captured at 1.30 p.m., and the advance on the Green Line was to begin two hours later.

After the capture of the Green Line the VI Corps was to form a defensive flank facing north.

The tanks, organized in battalions, were to be employed with a few exceptions only against the Blue Line and beyond. Forty-eight were to take part in the attack. Although it was hoped they would render good service, no great reliance was placed upon them and no plan depended upon their successful intervention.

From the 7th onwards the process of packing in the troops, that is the assembly, began. That night there was a bright moon, and on some parts of the front, notably on that of the 51st Division, the enemy put down a heavy bombardment, but fortunately only after the movements for the night had been carried out. To prevent a repetition of this on the following night, every known German battery was smothered in gas and high explosives, and the German guns were muzzled.

Seven double waves had to be in readiness to attack. It was not possible to provide shell-proof cover for this mass of men except for those in Arras. Moreover the trenches in the forward area had been considerably shelled and were consequently shallow and open-mouthed. The difficulty and anxiety of shepherding all these troops along the available roads, tracks and communication trenches, and then tucking them away without revealing their presence to the enemy, were very great. To have succeeded in doing so was a considerable achievement.

At noon on Easter Sunday practically everyone, even those who were not to take a direct part in the attack, was aware that the hour was about to strike. There was no mistake about it this time. The rumours plentifully supplied by the Intelligence had crystallized into something quite definite.

General Byng's calm announcement that on zero day the Canadian Corps would capture the Vimy Ridge galvanized the troops.

The last touches were being everywhere put in. The Medical Corps was placing at the junction of all trenches boards indicating

the way to the dressing stations. Men were driving in luminous posts and sticks at points where units would move overland to other points in the communication trenches, where guides would be waiting to lead them to the assembly trenches.

Out of the woods in the back area, as soon as it was dark on Saturday night, the tanks slowly lumbered forward down specially prepared tracks to their allotted places.

Amongst the infantry a rumour had spread that great masses of cavalry were closing up behind them. Some were impressed, others treated the idea as one more pointless joke of G.H.Q. The cavalry was in fact moving forward. Three divisions supported by the 17th Infantry Division were closing in behind the battle front. They were a magnificent sight, horses with glossy coats, shining leather, well-set-up men. When one regiment passed another halted by the wayside, the mounted men were proud to show themselves and the others were proud of them, proud to belong to so splendid an arm. The yeomen were now as smart as the smartest cavalry. It was impossible to realize that these men, so spick and span, had taken many a hard turn in the trenches.

The fine appearance of the cavalry was all the more remarkable since only skeleton formations had been left to look after the horses during the winter, the bulk of the regiments having been employed in the trenches or on other duties, and the horses' rations reduced to 9 pounds of oats and 6 pounds of hay; even this meagre allowance had often not been received.

The short rations had told most heavily on the artillery and transport horses which, with little or no cover, had had to do heavy work under very bad weather conditions. The casualties had consequently been severe; for instance, in the VI Corps alone nearly a hundred field artillery horses had died on the night of April 2nd-3rd.

The morning of Easter Sunday was lovely. Not a cloud in the sky. A sharp frost had solidified the mud of the previous evening. It was one of those days when it feels good to be alive. Men breathed in the crisp, life-giving air and looked at the blue heavens, grateful that this, if it was to be their last day, was so perfect. All those who could attended divine service. Few of them can have forgotten the solemnity of the occasion. Some listened to the familiar words of the Liturgy in the open, with the scent of spring in the wind. Others gathered in barns, and one padre collected his flock in an estaminet;

but wherever the services were held, and whatever the denomination of the congregation, they all took place in an atmosphere of great serenity.

There was no hate in the hearts of our soldiers, no cavilling at this great gamble in which everyone was playing his highest stake. No man computed his chances, for all knew these were beyond reckoning or calculation. They had the clear conscience that comes to the man who is carrying out a duty he well understands and orders that must be obeyed. He who looks into all men's hearts probably found that the prayer most frequently and most fervently uttered, especially amongst the young and untried, was a supplication not to fail, not to let the others down, not to show fear whatever happened, not to have to feel ashamed. Good God, anything better than that. Anything rather than live to be despised by your pals.

The artillery fire slackened in the afternoon. The lull would, it was hoped, deceive the enemy into thinking our bombardment had been a bluff. There were also two intervals of half an hour each to enable the Flying Corps to photograph the results of the gunfire. The slowing down of the bombardment gave the gunners time to sort things out after the enormous effort they had made, and collect themselves for the still greater one that lay before them. Ammunition was carefully laid out and fuses set so that everything should run smoothly in the morning. Wherever it was practicable, barrels of water were placed in the gun pits so that it would be possible to cool the guns when they became overheated.

The glass, though the weather was still fine, was dropping. Night fell, and it became very much colder.

The two subterranean ways which led from Arras under no-man's-land to within a few feet of the German lines, from which machine-guns were to rake the enemy's parapets, were opened. A number of field guns which had taken no part in the preparations were man-handled under cover of darkness to within a few hundred yards of the front, the better to be able to support the infantry in their advance beyond the immediate objectives.

The night was full of moving bodies of troops, hardly distinguishable from shadows. The scene was ghostly and very impressive. It seemed as if the dead of all past ages were silently moving to some great assembly, each one obeying an unspoken order, sure of his destination, unable to disregard the call.

Under the black sky which hung like a sombre canopy over the

battlefield, shaking and pulsating to the boom of the guns and ripped as with gigantic scissors by the rushing shells, the phantom regiments advanced. Smoothly and easily they went, almost invisible, black forms against a black background, propelled as if by the strong lashing wind, eastwards towards the point where they must meet the rising sun.

The weather was obviously breaking. The wind was backing northwards and blowing at the rate of thirty-five miles an hour. There were some icy rain-squalls. Those men who had not reached their destinations or for whom no cover was available, without great-coats and protected only by the heavy equipment with which each was festooned, shuddered. The lucky ones were those sheltering in the caves of Arras or in the Canadian tunnels.

Slowly a clutch of tanks waddled through Arras, their engines panting like asthmatic giants. They broke through the road at several places and one could not be extricated.

Soon after midnight practically all the troops were in position. Every support trench as far back as the Arras-Béthune road was packed with men at the mercy of a German counter-bombardment that never came. By 4.30 a.m. the very last man was in his place. The men of the VI Corps who were to take part in the first assault had slipped unobserved from the Arras caves into the assembly trenches. Tots of rum had been served all round, and most battalions had managed to provide a hot meal. The men, stretched out or sitting, slept or dozed. The artillery kept up its unhurried steady pounding of the German lines.

Operation Orders laid it down that all watches were to be synchronized at least twice during the evening and night. Officers moved from unit to unit checking time verbally or went over to Brigade H.Q. to do so. The telephone could not be trusted on a night like this, too much was at stake, and success might depend on accuracy.

The wind was now in the north-west, the squalls of rain had been followed by a drizzling mist. Towards morning snow interspersed with sleet began to fall. It was very cold. Those in command noted that however bad the weather it had one advantage: the attacking troops would be invisible in the squalls, and sleet was driving straight into the enemy's faces.

## THE BATTLE OF ARRAS—I

Two hours before zero, in the caves of Arras and the tunnels of Vimy an occasional flicker from a distant light showed faces grey and still against the inky distorted shadows. As the light went out again, the shadows jumped back into the uneven walls from which they had emerged, the faces disappeared into the rising tide of darkness on which they had seemed to float for a moment, and the great silence continued.

What were all these men thinking about now the hour that would be the last for so many was near? Doubtless just the ordinary thoughts that skim across the strange, thousand-faceted human mind. The very young were probably strained and excited, concealing with difficulty their nervousness, while the others, the older hands, grown fatalists by experience, thought little, fatigue playing pranks with fancy, conjuring up incongruous or pleasing memories, pictures flitting against a background of unreality. Some perhaps brooded as they evoked a future in which they would have no part. There may have been others who could have cried aloud as, wedged in between elbows and weapons, they conjured up pictures of open spaces, gardens, light, the sound of water and the breeze in English trees, small arms outstretched asking to be picked up, a face looking upwards with frightened eyes at the moment of parting; but the instinctive self-discipline of the race sealed all those lips, placed a mask on all those faces. The sudden flash of a torch, the light of a passing lantern revealed nothing; expressions of weariness or boredom, that was all.

There was almost complete silence save in some privileged corners where the reserves lay hidden, notably behind the Canadian lines where here and there tightly wedged groups round a candle played poker for unusually high stakes, the pessimists betting recklessly in paper chips.

In the assault trenches outside, the men, without greatcoats, huddled together for warmth, heads drooping under heavy steel helmets. Occasionally the rattle of equipment followed by the muffled call of a sergeant for 'less noise' disturbed the silence that

hung like a curtain over the front lines in the short intervals of the bombardment.

A cold moon just past the full showed at moments between huge, black, fantastically shaped clouds racing each other to obscure it. Sometimes the desolate space of no-man's-land would stand out much as a muddy lane must appear to an ant, a lane fringed by a forest whose trees were pickets and whose interlaced branches were strands of wire.

Everywhere glistening mud and the sparkling mirrors of thousands of water-filled shell-holes reflected the moon. The smoke of an explosion twirling in high convolutions over the enemy's line would show amber edges, a high cloud would be outlined for a few seconds in blinding silver, then all was pitch darkness again.

The trench-mortars in the front line kept on their exasperating endless barking. Terriers of war, they yapped ceaselessly at the flitting moon. Machine-guns chattered intermittently like a man in a fever. Only very occasionally came the crash of an answering German shell.

The weather was getting colder. An icy drizzle was falling driven by a strong north-west wind. The shelling was not as heavy as it had been during the periods of intense bombardment, but nevertheless the impression of continuous pounding was frightful. A persistent bass formed a background of rumour to the cacophony nearer at hand.

To those standing on the Arras-St. Pol road it seemed as if, far away, muffled drums were being beaten continuously. The constant sinister output of noise, pitched for long periods on one monotonous note, would sink periodically to an angry staccato muttering, then swell to a great onrushing volume of sound like a hurricane in a forest. To one advancing towards the assault trenches with the heavies behind him and the field guns near at hand, each individual salvo was perceptible, however rapid the succession of explosions. The gradation of sound ranged from that of distant trip-hammers to the crash of slamming doors, then swelled to the wild stridency of furiously beaten anvils, dominated and submerged every few moments by thunderclaps from nearby batteries, until close to the front line it ceased being a sound at all and became just a succession of sudden shattering blows of indescribable brutality.

Half an hour to go. The order to fix bayonets is now passed along. Much uneasy movement, shifting of position, a continuous clicking,

miles of clicking, as thousands of bayonets are pressed home over rifle-barrels.

Ten minutes, five minutes, two minutes before zero. Every officer, head bent, gazes intently at his watch. Not a thought but of his job now.

Only a few seconds to go, then suddenly a complete silence, an absolute cessation of the immense roar, a stillness punctuated and emphasized by the barking of the trench-mortars up and down the lines; every gun had stopped firing.

That sudden silence was more terrifying than the most reverberating explosion. It had the effect of making men feel they were losing their balance on the edge of an abyss. No typhoon uprooting a tropical forest, no storm with the lightning crackling in the high mountains could give so complete an impression of all-embracing power. Only an earthquake with its sudden balance-wrecking movement underfoot could cause a comparable anguish.

It did not last long. At 5.30 to the second the earth shook as the mines exploded with a muffled roar and every gun on the fifteen-mile front of attack and beyond it opened fire with a clamour such as had probably never been heard in the world since mountains were raised from its molten surface. The air screamed as it was torn by a thousand shells. Miles up the great projectiles hummed their mighty drone. Lower down through each layer of air the shells flew according to their kind, until, quite low above the lines of men closing in behind the barrage, the missiles of the light mortars and the bullets of the machine-guns hissed.

Behind the infantry waves, hundreds of flashes a minute came from the supporting guns. In front the blinding many-coloured flames of explosions made the enemy's lines appear to be burning like a furnace. Out of a skeleton-like wood between our heavy batteries and the front line a great flight of rooks arose circling in wild panic. The light was dim. Just enough to see your way, not clear enough to aim a rifle or a machine-gun save at the closest range.

Within three minutes of the time it took our men to form up behind the barrage, a new kind of illumination was added to the fantastic scene. For miles upon miles, all along the German lines hundreds of flares went up. Red, white, orange, the distress signals shot high, falling back in sprays of sparkling multicoloured rain. The German infantry was begging for support. The British were upon them.



At the first lift in the barrage the advance began. Our infantry moved steadily forward. The ground was broken here and there by enormous, impassable mine-craters, everywhere pitted with shell-holes full of glaucous mud and water, in places two or three feet deep. Nevertheless, wave after wave clambered out of the trenches and made their way in astonishingly good order. The Lewis gunners had a particularly hard time. Their heavy weapons on their shoulders, they fell frequently, many of their guns becoming choked with mud and useless for the time being.

In spite of difficulties and obstacles the men pressed on eagerly, splashing and splashing in the water, as fast as they could drag their mud-clogged feet. So keen were they that, it was ascertained later, many casualties were caused by the leading waves rushing into their own barrage.

Over a scene of desolation, of flame and smoke such as Doré never dreamt of, the red sun rose. The jagged silhouette of Arras appeared on the right, on the left was the vague outline of the Vimy Ridge. The drizzle changed to a heavy rainstorm mixed with snow. Wisps of icy mist trailed across the trenches on which they seemed to catch for a moment like a veil. Through this, flying low, the sudden noise of their engines so close overhead that men stopped and looked up, our planes appeared making straight for the enemy lines. In the bad light the special markings of the infantry contact planes were hardly discernible, but the long fluttering streamers could easily be seen.

Few casualties were suffered from enemy shells. The German barrage was late, from eight to fifteen minutes after ours, and what there was of it was ragged and desultory; also it came down in a zone vacated by the attackers. It was evident that the opposing artillery had been completely mastered. Except for the heavies, on many parts of the front the enemy guns presently ceased firing altogether.

We now know that our bombardment and gas had prevented ammunition coming up and that the German batteries were short of shells. One of the reasons for this was that the German Command had decided against having large dumps near the guns, for fear these might cause undue expenditure of ammunition. They paid for their mistaken parsimony in lives and in munitions too, since the helpless guns were unable to hinder our counter-battery work, which time after time blew up what stores of shells their guns had left. Moreover, in the rare cases when the hostile batteries were not

## THE BATTLE OF ARRAS



(top) CANADIANS ADVANCING UNDER FIRE  
(bottom) ON THE BANKS OF THE SCARP.



overwhelmed by our fire and had some munitions available, the gunners had no idea what the situation was, owing to the destruction of cables.

There were very few incidents in the attack on the Black Line and hardly any mistakes: it fell to us in the main at exactly the moment prescribed, although here and there nests of Germans held out.<sup>1</sup>

The only major exception occurred on the Canadian left (4th Canadian Division) where the advance of the centre was held up. Here the first waves passed over their objectives probably without recognizing them. Supports in the centre lost direction: the Bavarians emerging from their dug-outs swarmed back into their trenches, pouring a murderous fire into the Canadians and indulging in frequent counter-attacks. Nevertheless the flanks of the division gained their objective. At some other points much the same thing occurred but with less serious results.

Whenever, owing to bad light or obliterated trenches, our moppers-up failed to locate the narrow entrances to the deep dug-outs which formed part of the German front line system, the defenders were out in a flash firing into the backs of our advancing men. When this occurred our losses were always heavy, but in most cases our moppers-up located the entrances and dealt with the occupants who did not surrender. Very few of the Germans who showed resistance survived.

The Leinsters of the 24th Division on the extreme left met with the fiercest opposition. They had attacked earlier, under terribly difficult conditions. In sleet and snow the officers guided the men by compass over incredibly bad ground towards unrecognizable objectives. The Irish suffered some casualties from our own guns, and very severe losses from the enfilade fire coming from across the Souchez valley. A Homeric hand-to-hand struggle took place on the slippery ground of the bleak snow-covered hill. The Lewis gunners wielded their weapons, rendered useless by mud, as enormous clubs. It was a fight to a finish; few prisoners were taken, but at the end the Leinsters were masters of the German first line. A few men reached the second line which was obliterated, but the Germans were holding in strength the natural cover in rear. The position was untenable and our men in the second line were later withdrawn to the first line, which was consolidated. On the greater

<sup>1</sup> At some points, but not at many, our shells fell short. This was so in the case of the 9th (Scottish) Division, where some smoke-shells caused casualties. Nevertheless this division, which was the only one to use a smoke-barrage, was highly gratified with the result.

part of the front, the less bellicose, that is the majority, of the defenders were soon streaming back towards our lines, often unaccompanied, to be collected later in the waiting cages. On their way they passed the oncoming troops who, mildly curious but totally devoid of animosity, pestered the poor wretches as was their habit for 'souvenirs', though they themselves had their day's work before them.

The small resistance encountered, save at some points, is not to be wondered at. The astonishing thing is that there were any men left to defend that first shattered system. The survivors, stunned and stupefied, surrendered freely. None can blame them. Rather must one wonder at the extraordinary pluck of those who showed fight. For days now in the front line even the most urgent work had had to be abandoned. Companies reduced to 70 or 80 men, holding fronts of three to four hundred yards, had spent the last six days, in most cases without relief, huddled in the bottom of insanitary dug-outs, every now and then called upon to make desperate efforts to relieve comrades trapped in shelters whose entrances had been blown in. The trenches were half full of water, the men were stiff with cold yet many were shaking with fever.

To the defenders it seemed as if the British shelling hardly ever diminished in intensity during the preparation. There was never a moment's rest nor a second's respite. Prisoners from one battery said they had been unable to leave their dug-outs or fire their guns for four days. Food was short. In ordinary times from the sheltering eastern slope of Vimy it took ration parties only fifteen minutes to reach the front line. It had taken them six hours during the last few days, and very often they disappeared, never to be heard of again. In many cases none had come up for ninety-six hours. The roads leading to Vimy Ridge were impassable, and the defenders had been all but completely cut off for days by the iron curtain of our guns. In whole sectors the front line garrison had to fall back on their iron rations which they ate in fear under the trembling earth. It took runners hours to reach their destinations if they did so at all. Practically every other form of communication had broken down. The Germans speak of a symphony of hell, and so it must have appeared to them. In Douai, fifteen miles away, every pane of glass was shattered by the terrific reverberations of that distant storm. The villages behind Vimy Ridge, hitherto peaceful places, were drawn into the conflict. Great shells roared over or crashed into them without ceasing. The Germans could see at night the flash of

our guns on the Lorette Ridge continuously lighting up the ruins of Mont St. Eloi, Bouvigny Wood, Berthonval, Maison Blanche and the skeleton trees on the Arras road, with hardly an answering flash from their guns.

To these men zero hour came almost as a relief. It had been long awaited. Few can have expected to survive. 'When the English attack to-morrow', wrote Lieutenant Runge of the *79th Reserve Division* to a brother officer on the evening of the 8th, 'dear Heinicke, you will see me no more.'

The account of our attack depicted from the German side makes fearful reading. It appeared as if the fires of hell were advancing to consume what was left of the shaken, starved defenders. 'Waves of Britons, broad and deep, roll slowly forward behind their barrage in an all-engulfing maelstrom of earth, smoke and iron which swallows up all before it.' 'Death came waltzing along, playing its bloody pranks on our front.' This writer describes how, in every direction, enormous masses of earth were thrown upwards in continuous jets while over them slowly swirled tremendous clouds of smoke. There were constant ear-splitting, shattering noises that seemed to loosen the skin from the skull, while the eyes were blinded by continuous flashes. Every minute meant sixty stabs of fear.

A German officer, attempting to describe his impressions, wrote: 'There was a great, awful silence, then on the second, a *Trommelfeuer* of incredible power. Everything was noise and fire. Nerves were strained to breaking-point. Hearts were of lead, beating sharp and heavy against the breast, breath stopped, the mind wandered. Then the cry: '*Raus, raus, die Engländer!*' ('Out, out, the English.')

An attempt had been made to organize the defence in depth, but this was difficult on a ridge with a steep reverse slope. Departing from the usual plan, the regiments had two battalions in position and one in support. But the numerical weakness of the companies greatly reduced the efficacy of the plan. Reliance had to be placed chiefly upon machine-gun posts, each supported by an infantry detachment.

Machine-guns knocked out or rendered useless from over-heating were reported on every hand. Calls for support remained unanswered, runners never reached their destination, grenades ran short and fresh supplies could not be brought up. Whole battalions were submerged, regimental headquarters invaded. In the *261st Regiment* only five men out of two companies escaped. Where here

and there dug-outs still held out the air was unbreathable because of phosphorus fumes. As the barrage passed, the Germans saw khaki figures topped by flat steel helmets swarming in every direction.

The different headquarters were entirely without news. The machine-gun fire of the defence sounded weak and intermittent, drowned in the enormous roar of the British bombardment. Smoke completely obscured the front lines. It was not till two and a half hours after the attack had been launched that a runner, wounded in three places and with a shattered arm, reported to the commander of the Neuville St. Vaast sector. The news he brought was long out of date; the British were by then advancing on the Blue Line.

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While we were consolidating the Black Line the weather changed. There was now less snow and more rain. Icy water came down in torrents driven by a strong wind in the enemy's faces, rendering even more difficult their hopeless task, but at 7.15 a.m. the rain ceased for a short time.

At 7.30 the immense mass of the attackers resumed its advance against the second objective, the Blue Line, which had been kept under a terrific bombardment. The troops followed the barrage which now moved forward fifty yards every two minutes; not that the immense machine of the attacking armies had been still for a moment, the front alone had halted, in the back areas the progress had been continuous. Just as a caterpillar remains with its head motionless while its body compresses itself in readiness to advance, so the huge mass of the troops in rear had been coming up since zero hour.

Wet to the skin our men surged forward, rifles with fixed bayonets slung or at the trail, Lewis gunners with their heavy weapons on their shoulders. If the men who had taken the first position were eager and inclined to press forward dangerously, those who now led the assault were still harder to hold. They had tasted success; behind them lay the formidable German first line that had seemed impregnable; they had seen scores of depressed and shaken prisoners streaming back; the enemy dead lay about in great numbers. No wonder our men never even realized that their clothing clung damply to their limbs and that their hands were frozen. They were living high; the most phlegmatic felt a sense of exultation. All realized they were going through an experience so intensely exhilarating, so

completely absorbing, that it is safe to say very few out of those thousands thought of themselves as anything but a part of a victorious army as they pressed on close behind the barrage.

The tanks, most of which had been reserved for the attack on the second position, were now lumbering forward. The enemy were still suffering from shock. They had not had time to recover, so, in spite of the very great strength of the Blue Line and their numerous strong points, the resistance they offered, save in some sectors, was not considerable; where they did fight, however, they fought hard.

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On the extreme right our troops met with strong opposition in Neuville Vitasse. The German account tells how the village was captured in the first onrush within ten minutes. This, however, is inaccurate. The enemy apparently never heard of the desperate resistance put up by some seventy of their men and a couple of machine-guns in the centre of the village, for no survivors came back. It was not until after 11 a.m. that the village was in our hands. Two tanks were to have co-operated, but of these one never started and the other was soon on fire. They nevertheless created a considerable moral effect, as is shown by the German account, which states that the village was attacked by six tanks, and the position to the north of it by five. Fear often duplicates the numbers of an enemy; this multiplication by eleven shows the awe these engines inspired.

St. Martin-sur-Cojeul eventually fell to the 30th Division, which at first had failed to progress. In the Neuville Vitasse sector the enemy were at bay by noon. Every man they could lay hands on at regimental or brigade headquarters, officers' servants, signallers, cooks, was thrown into the firing line; but of this, as is perforce the way in war, we had no inkling; we could not guess that they considered their position hopeless. Supports there were none; ammunition was running very short; they were in danger of being outflanked from the north. The end seemed to them in sight, but we perceived only one thing clearly, that our troops south of the village were checked by the last trench of the first position. Uncut wire had held up our advance at the junction of the 56th and 14th Divisions, while flanking fire from Wancourt inflicted cruel losses on both.

Some of our batteries had managed as early as 10 a.m. to cross the German trenches and were ready to cover an advance against the northern extremity of the Hindenburg Line; but the infantry was not



able to take advantage of this support. Farther north the enemy, cut off by our barrage, were driven from the important position of Telegraph Hill, and by 11 a.m. the survivors, short of cartridges and grenades, abandoned the Blue Line.

The celebrated Harp position was captured. Our men swept past the village of Tilloy-les-Moufflaines, leaving behind them parties of the enemy who fought on amongst the ruins for hours. Four tanks were ditched or destroyed in this attack. So overwhelming was it that of one enemy battalion only twenty-five men got back from the Blue Line. The German account states that by 8.30 a.m. one of their field artillery regiments in this sector had not a single gun left in action. By 11.30 our men had overrun the German battery positions. All was going well, the sky had cleared, since 10.15 the sun had been out and the wind was not so high.

Ten minutes' delay in leaving the Black Line caused the troops attacking Observation Ridge to fall 400 yards behind the barrage. This seriously increased the difficulties of a hard task. The ridge was a long low spur running north from Tilloy, on whose reverse slope lay the Blue Line which was well wired and stoutly defended. Strong resistance caused the infantry to fall still farther behind the barrage, a fact of which the enemy were not slow to take advantage. Swarming out of their dug-outs they tackled our men, and fierce hand-to-hand struggles ensued, but in these our men proved superior.

In one case a German machine-gun held its fire till our people were only five yards off and then did dreadful execution. The casualties were heavy on both sides, but the enemy suffered far more heavily than we did; one of their companies had but two survivors, both wounded, and in another case only four men out of four platoons escaped. Tanks would have proved invaluable in this attack, but of the two expected one never appeared at all and the other got ditched in our trenches.

The Railway Triangle, a formidable bulwark fifty to sixty feet high, defended by numerous machine-guns, lay between the Black and Blue Lines south of the Scarpe. Here the enemy offered strong resistance.

This bastion was, nevertheless, captured at 12.40 p.m., thanks to the foresight of the artillery commander of the 9th Division attacking north of the river. He put down a smoke-screen, under cover of which a specially detailed battery dashed forward and brought

flanking fire to bear on the defence. Soon the enemy who had been enfilading our troops north of the river had the tables turned on them and fled.

The success achieved by the VI Corps, in spite of serious delay, was considerable. The enemy's resistance had been broken. Abandoned guns could be seen everywhere. Detachments who had served their pieces till our infantry got to close rifle-range now took to their heels, but the men of one battery at least were plucky enough to blow up their guns before they fled. The German infantry scattered and ran, hardly even attempting to halt on the Blue Line, pursued by those of our men who had enough wind left to follow them.

Meanwhile the 37th Division with the cavalry hard on its heels was closing up in rear of the VI Corps.

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Immediately north of the Scarpe, Scots and South Africans captured the Blue Line facing them without undue difficulty. The enemy was so shaken that although his positions were extremely strong he put up a very poor resistance, with the exception of some groups that fought to the last. Of one battalion there were no survivors. Whole companies were swallowed up in the attack and never heard of again. Of those who defended St. Laurent Cemetery only seven men escaped.

All four tanks allotted to this division, the 9th, failed to come into action. Two were knocked out by enemy shells. The third broke down in front of the railway, and the officer in charge of the fourth was killed; but the success was so complete that there was little need for them.

Immediately north of the 9th Division, the 34th had to advance over ground commanded by the high ridge on which stood the Point du Jour Farm. It had been expected that their heaviest task would be the capture of the southern portion of the Blue Line which faced it, generally known as Wire Valley. This shallow depression was filled with wire and ran parallel to and in front of the German trenches. Furthermore the defence, following the railway, formed a deep re-entrant so that the flank troops would reach their objective ahead of those in the centre.

As matters turned out, the advance in this sector of the division's front met with less resistance than had been expected. Most of the

Germans were caught in their dug-outs, but the nature of the ground, the intricate system of the defence, and the difficulty of clearing the trenches resulted in the attacking units getting very mixed up, and it took some time to sort them out.

On the left of this division, the Northumbrian regiments suffered severe casualties, especially among their officers. Heavy machine-gun fire at the junction of the 34th and 51st Divisions caused troops of the latter to flow into the area of the former, creating great confusion. Battalions coming up telescoped into those in front, and for some time the situation here was both anxious and obscure.

If the enemy had been cowed by the shelling on the greater part of the front of attack, this was certainly not true of most of those opposing the 51st (Highland) Division immediately to the north of the 34th, on the extreme left flank of the Third Army. Bavarians and Highlanders fought it out to the last on that cold wet morning in a maze of half-destroyed trenches, over the sodden, slippery, shell-pitted, wire-strewn ground, rendered more uneven still by enormous clods of earth reeking of explosives. To the accompaniment of the deafening noise of the barrage, in a welter of close fighting, the attack was pressed home. The left brigade swept forward, and although encountering considerable opposition captured its objectives in the Blue Line. The task of the right brigade proved to be even harder. Gaps were blown in the attacking waves, which gave the Bavarian machine-gunners their chance once our barrage had moved past them.

The severity of the fighting may be gauged from the casualties. The 6th Scaforth's lost three hundred and twenty-five officers and men in capturing the first objective, and only one officer remained to lead the attack on the Blue Line. One company of the Scaforth's whose objective was the Blue Line lost ninety men before reaching the Black Line. Another body of Highlanders suffered severe casualties on their way to the Blue Line, from the effects of a terrific explosion. Many men were either buried or killed. It was thought that some of the enemy, skulking in a dug-out, had chosen the moment when they could inflict the maximum casualties to explode a large *minenwerfer* bomb store. Immediately after the explosion six Germans emerged from a dug-out and offered to surrender. Being assumed to be the authors of the disaster they were immediately killed.

It was not until eight hours and forty-eight minutes after zero (instead of six hours and forty minutes, that is at 2.15 p.m. instead of

12.10 p.m.) that the Highlanders gained complete control of the Blue Line, after very hard fighting over the long forward slope they had had to cross to reach it. The two tanks allotted to the division never reached the front line.

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We never realized how close we were to complete success during the long halt on the Blue Line. To the Germans the situation appeared most serious, as well it might. In the centre the *11th German Infantry Division*, whose front extended somewhat north of the Scarpe, on the sound military principle that a natural obstacle should not be the dividing line between higher formations, was facing the attack not only of part of our 9th Division north of the Scarpe, but also of our 15th, 12th and 3rd Divisions south of it. The commander of this division begged the 'Arras Group' for support, but the Command had such bad news of the Bavarians north of the river that it was considered imperative to hold a regiment of Mecklenberg Grenadiers, the only one available, in readiness to send there. Only two companies could be sent to the *11th Division*, while the one remaining battalion was sent to the Brown Line west of Monchy with orders to hold it at all costs. Had we but known it, there was not the remotest chance of our being opposed in this sector until the Brown Line was reached, and little resistance could have been offered even there.

Behind the German front the village of Pelves afforded a typical picture of the atmosphere saturated with defeat in which the Germans fought. A convoy of motor lorries jammed together and abandoned blocked the main street, gas clouds drifted over the place towards which small bodies of grey-clad mud-soaked reserves were marching, urged on by their officers, while a stream of distracted, terrified civilians tried to slip by the marching men or dragged handcarts laden with goods and children across the water-logged fields.

In the sector north of the Scarpe as far as Thélus, the enemy had practically no reserves to oppose us. Two Bavarian divisions holding the Vimy Ridge from just north of the Scarpe to Thélus were facing the attack of four of ours. By noon the only reserves available were three Pioneer companies. Apart from these the very last men had been engaged.

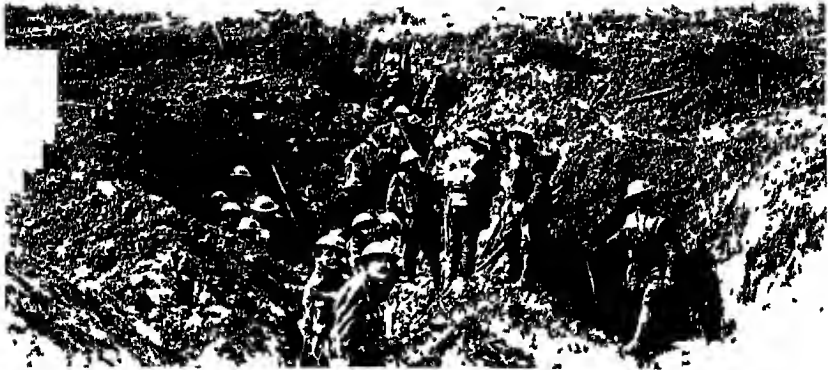
The Germans have found it extremely difficult to reconstruct even approximately what befell these Bavarians, so severe were the losses

in officers, so complete the destruction of regimental records. The principle witnesses are lying for ever in the clay of Artois, and it seems that those who survived that terrible Easter Monday as prisoners can give no very coherent account of what happened. They speak of flame-throwers projecting fire sixty to seventy feet ahead of the attacking British, of broad lines of unhurrying khaki-clad men, rifle on shoulder, many carrying light bridges or planks to cross the trenches, advancing in apparently endless numbers, while, clearly perceptible, topping the distant ridges, yet another army seemed to be on the move. Their losses were very heavy. Many companies were reduced to a handful of men. If it had been difficult during the preliminary bombardment to send up stores and munitions to the infantry, it was impossible to do so now. The only cartridges available were those of the dead. The guns, short of shells, many of them shot to pieces, were presently all but silent. Battery after battery was abandoned. The German airmen, beaten by numbers, were driven from the sky. Despair seized the infantry. What were their guns doing? Where were their planes? Why were reserves not coming up? Was there to be no counter-attack, no rescue? But nothing came, no supports appeared. There was no response to the frenzied calls for help, and while their own back areas remained empty, the scattered men in the reserve trenches, peering through the smoke, observed with horror fresh lines of British appear; they saw the attack rolling forward towards them carrying all before it. Everywhere the cry '*die Tommies*' was raised again, as waves of khaki-clad men appeared in endless succession moving steadily up the slope before them.

From every part of the front the same tale came back; trenches and strongholds taken, battery positions invaded, machine-guns rendered useless from overheating, a general shortage of ammunition.

But there were what seemed to the Germans heaven-sent respites, long pauses which gave the Bavarians the breathing-space they so sorely needed. During one of these, soon after 1 p.m., what defenders there were left on the southern portion of the Vimy Ridge saw, as the smoke cleared, strong bodies of British infantry grouped on the Thélus heights. These were the troops belonging to the 2nd Canadian Division. Officers, stick in hand, could easily be discerned walking about and conferring. Comparative silence reigned. Both sides seemed to be drawing breath, getting their second wind. Then suddenly firing began; starting at one point it was quickly

## THE BATTLE OF ARRAS



(top) CANADIANS IN THE BLUE LINE  
(bottom) AN 18-POUNDER AT ATHIES



taken up at others, until the crackling of musketry and the sharp quick tack-tack of machine-guns resumed their crepitation over the whole field. The guns chimed in again. The British were advancing once more.

Presently the Canadians were swarming all over the Vimy Ridge. Their attack was everywhere successful save on the extreme left, where Hill 145, dominating the northern extremity of Vimy, remained in German hands. Here the 4th Canadian Division suffered severely, coming under heavy enfilade fire from 'The Pimple', a high point north of Hill 145.

The advance of the 3rd Canadian Division through Bonval Wood compelled admiration even from the enemy. The attacking battalions, co-operating brilliantly with each other and with those of the 2nd Canadian Division on their right, advanced, so the enemy account tells us, with extraordinary speed. The defenders were rapidly surrounded. Their situation was ghastly. One by one their points of resistance fell. The trenches were full of wounded; some long unattended were moaning; others recently hit screamed continuously. Into this bleeding mass of humanity fell a continuous hail of hand-grenades. A battalion commander and six men were all that were left to surrender in this corner of the battlefield.

Similar scenes were being enacted all over the Vimy Ridge, which, destined to be famed for ever as one of the world's charnel houses, was enjoying on that Easter Monday its most ostentatious gala.

\* \* \* \* \*

While the 4th Canadian Division was still stubbornly but vainly trying to advance, the remaining divisions captured the Red Line, which was the final objective of the 3rd, by 9.30 a.m.

The Germans surrendered freely and their artillery reply was weak. Ahead lay the stronghold of Thélus village on the front of the 2nd Canadian Division. Presently three white Very lights high in the air, the pre-arranged signal, announced its capture.

But if progress in the main had been easy, there had been desperate fighting at some points. For five hours, so the Germans say, the struggle round one regimental headquarters (that of the *262nd Reserve Infantry Regiment*) went on, long after the crest of the ridge had been reached by the Canadian main bodies.



The German account describes the sensation of the men in the small islands of resistance on the forward slopes of Viny. They felt doomed, utterly cut off from the world in which they had once lived, that lay somewhere on the far side of a broad impassable belt of mud, iron and blood. For a moment hope would be awakened by the appearance of a German aeroplane, but it always disappeared to the east. Despair would again fill all hearts as it was realized that the British were masters of the air, driving every German machine that attempted to approach back over its own lines. No chance of the lonely defenders even being seen, or their position reported.

As early as 11 a.m. the *79th German Reserve Division*, attacked by the three northernmost Canadian divisions, was in danger of being surrounded. Its three regiments were in line and they were overrun, their artillery giving them but little support. To make matters worse the German artillery about Lens, quite unaware of the position, began shelling the heights, landing many enormous 10 cm. and 21 cm. shells on their own unfortunate troops.

The only reserves were three companies on the railway east of the ridge, reinforced by Pioneers, batmen, etc. A regiment withdrawn from the line the night before, weary to death, was ordered back from the rest billet it had just reached and sent forward to the railway with orders to defend the position to the last. Very few counter-attacks were possible owing to lack of reserves. One launched against Les Tilleuls failed, another a little farther north near La Folie was so gallantly led that it deserves mention in honour of a brave enemy. The 7th Company of the *262nd Reserve Regiment*, commanded by Lieutenant Israël, together with the survivors of three other companies and every available man he could collect, delivered a desperate onslaught which accounted for some 200 Canadians killed and a number of wounded prisoners; but this forlorn hope failed and presently the heroic little band was swept back by sheer weight of numbers.

\*   \*   \*   \*   \*

The 2nd and 1st Canadian Divisions, together with the 1st Royal West Kent of the British 13th Brigade, swept forward, the left wheeling right-handed against the Blue Line through lanes cut by the heavy artillery in the German wire. Presently they had their reward. Standing on the crest of the ridge, they gazed down on the level plain of Douai, the first Allied soldiers to do so since the far-off days of



## THE BATTLE OF ARRAS



(top) CANADIANS LOOKING DOWN ON VIMY VILLAGE FROM THE RIDGE  
(bottom) GERMANS SURRENDERING TO THE ADVANCING CANADIANS

1915, when for a few hours the French had held the northern extremity of the heights. It was an extraordinary sight, a glimpse of another world. Behind them lay an expanse of churned-up mud and desolation completely commanded from where they stood. Even the duck-boards at the bottom of some of the communication trenches were clearly visible. Below and beyond them on the German side lay a peaceful countryside with villages that appeared from a distance to be untouched by war. The men were wildly enthusiastic and their sense of victory was enhanced by finding battery after battery abandoned on the edge of the woods that fringed the eastern slopes of the ridge.

It was at this moment, so the Germans tell us, that some of the guns they still had in action had magnificent targets, notably on the heights between Thélus and Farbus on the 2nd Canadian Division front. Here heavy columns of Canadian infantry appeared, standing against the skyline until forced to scatter by artillery and machine-gun fire. It was now 1 p.m. and the Canadians were masters of the Blue Line.

Canadian artillery observers were bewildered by the number of targets as they gazed down on to the plain below, where battery after battery lay exposed. Not a single German company could move across the broad plain unobserved. The Canadian guns, which the enemy acknowledged had been particularly well handled throughout, were turned on to the few transport columns and the rare groups of infantry that were visible. Many concrete gun-emplacements could also be seen, but against these the field gunners were powerless and messages had to be sent back to the heavies to deal with them. Meanwhile the troops in rear, in the highest spirits, were ransacking the dug-outs for souvenirs and many a damp pocket was bulging with German cigars.

While the main bodies of the Canadians consolidated the crest, patrols were pushed forward down the eastern slope of Vimy. Over the greater part of the ridge the troops wandered with complete impunity, for, save for a great shell roaring over at intervals from the north, the German artillery was silent, and the open plain beyond offered no shelter for any counter-attack, no possibility of bringing up either munitions or reinforcements before dark. The German defensive system was completely broken. The enemy's General Staff had failed to grasp the underlying principle of Ludendorff's new system of defence in depth. Instead of having the

artillery reserves either just out of range of our bombardment or concealed and silent within supporting distance, great numbers of guns were massed, ineffective and wasted, miles to the rear. The vast Place d'Armes at Douai was packed with heavy artillery which remained there, useless as scrap-iron during the first phase of the battle. The same was true of the 15 cm. howitzers and long-range guns which stood wheel to wheel in the courtyard of Erquelinc Château. Munition columns had to wait ten hours or more at the railhead at Quiery la Motte for their supply of shells. Only gas shells were available in any quantity at that place; these had been accumulated for an attack intended to take place a fortnight previously but which had been called off in view of our preparations.

Failing all else these shells were sent forward, but owing to the prevailing westerly wind they had to be fired into our back areas. This had the effect of increasing the sense of abandonment prevailing in the German infantry and served further to depress their already lowered morale. They were all the more disheartened since they had been told a few days previously that ample supplies of ammunition were available.

Although here and there small posts of Germans still held out, the second main objective, the Blue Line, was firmly held by the end of the morning save on the two extreme flanks. The only potential danger on our left lay in the wooded heights and ruined townships of the Souchez valley, and on these our airmen and our gunners kept careful watch. In the north the Germans still clung to Hill 145, and in the south, beyond Neuville Vitasse, the 30th and 21st Divisions, which were to have advanced after the capture of that locality, had made little progress.

Although the Blue Line had not everywhere been captured in the time allocated, there were still several hours of daylight, and the success had been so great that it seemed quite possible a break-through would be achieved.

The most serious result of the delay was a breakdown in the timetable south of the Scarpe. The result of this was that a considerable portion of the VI Corps artillery, unable to advance as anticipated, was compelled to carry out the bombardment of the German third position at long range. As a consequence the wire in front of the Brown Line was not well cut.

Taking the attack as a whole, although the losses had been severe at some points, they had in the main been light considering the

magnitude of the operation. Our guns had done their work extremely well.

The weather having considerably improved since 10 a.m., observers in balloons had been able to see during the latter part of the morning. Earlier their position in driving squalls had been a dreadful one. Several of them had had their balloons turned completely inside out. One broke loose and drifted high towards the German lines. Our anti-aircraft guns tried desperately to bring it down, but without success, and it disappeared over enemy territory.

Our aeroplanes in spite of the bad weather conditions, which prevented many leaving the sodden ground, played a very noble part. They had not abandoned the infantry for a moment even when the gale was at its worst, but it was not till the sky cleared that they were able to work with maximum efficiency. The contact planes, flying low, reported many a German stronghold and machine-gun to the artillery. They located the front line by signal flares lighted by the infantry, and when unable to make out what line had been reached, sounded klaxons or dropped lights which indicated to our advanced troops that they should make their position known. They caused panic amongst the Germans by machine-gunning their trenches from low altitudes. Others watched the enemy's movements. Upon these the German anti-aircraft guns fired furiously, and the higher air was studded with round, tight, white or brown puffs of smoke, just as if some invisible machine were fastening gigantic buttons with great speed and precision on the quilt formed by the dark clouds. Here and there a German machine appeared, but on the whole the enemy aircraft gave little trouble.

The immense battlefield presented an extraordinary spectacle. Thousands of men were working in the open making roadways and passages over the old trench system. Each division was building two artillery routes and some of these were already well advanced. The area at the back of the trenches, which for years had looked like a desert, now swarmed with troops. Heavy columns of infantry were coming up to take part in the further attack, batteries could be seen everywhere picking their way forward. Here and there a gun or a limber that had slipped over a temporary bridge into a trench, or got ditched in a shell-hole, was being pulled out again at the price of great effort, reinforced gun-teams and much bad language. Farther back some of the heavier guns, their pro-

protective-camouflage wire screens torn away, were packing up to take part in the great forward movement. Tents were springing up like mushrooms on the slopes about La Targette and Mont St. Eloi. Railway battalions were already at work prolonging the narrow-gauge railways. The roads within sight of Vimy were rapidly filling with slow-moving traffic.

The old German defence system was a dreadful sight. Shattered beyond description, the trenches looked ghastly. Debris of all kinds was scattered in every direction, strands of barbed wire impeded every step, shattered timber and derelict equipment marked the entrances to what had been dug-outs, and mud was everywhere, sticky mud and water in which lay half-submerged bodies or an occasional severed limb. At some points where the attacking waves had been caught by machine-guns there were rows of our men, generally on their faces, their arms outstretched, their rifles with fixed bayonets in front of them as they had fallen from their hands. Moppers-up were still hunting about, and now and then a white-faced German was extricated from some hole. Stretcher-bearers moving slowly about were carrying wounded men back to the dressing stations. At one point behind the Canadian line a not unfriendly group formed round a young German subaltern who was maintaining stoutly in good English that he was quite aware that America had entered the war, but, he asserted, on the side of the Central Powers. Groups of signallers were running out lines; Headquarters were moving up. Scattered on the wide front, derelict tanks on their sides, some still burning, drew the eye by their monstrous bulk. The ground reeked with the stench of explosives.

The barrage, pounding on and on, throwing up a screen of smoke and flame, partly veiled our side of the battlefield from the enemy. Over the heads of our troops screeched the heavy shells ceaselessly battering at the German communications, cutting off from all support what was left of the defenders.

Our men were exultant as they moved over the conquered ground. The sense of victory was in them. The coolest felt tremendous excitement though few showed it.

The story of a great number of individual struggles was written on the ground. German machine-gunners lying bayoneted or killed by hand-grenades beside their guns, dead sprawling on dug-out steps; British and Germans stretched out side by side in trenches,

There were beyond doubt many feats of individual and collective valour on the enemy's side; there certainly were on ours. Few have been recorded, but even these make too long a list to mention. Every division could tell of groups of two or three men dealing with determined Germans whose resistance was holding up battalions or even brigades; every battalion could boast of the outstanding bravery and leadership of an officer, the devotion and instantaneous response to the call of self-sacrifice of a private or N.C.O.

The grim determination, the steadfast purpose animating the British is well illustrated by the action of an officer who was leading his men although wounded, when a shell-splinter struck his hand. Drawing his revolver with the other hand, he calmly shot off the damaged part which hung dangling, then advanced again at the head of his men until he fell desperately wounded for the third time.



## THE BATTLE OF ARRAS—II

THE advance from the Blue Line was the decisive move of the battle.

As has been seen, this was to have begun at 12.10 p.m. but in the case of some divisions it was delayed. The 15th Division south of the Scarpe, for instance, was not able to move forward till 2 p.m. Still it would be possible to see until nearly 8 o'clock. Six hours of daylight remained; since the two strongest German defensive systems lay shattered behind the attacking troops, and only the Brown Line stood between them and the key position of Monchy-le-Preux, every hope was permissible. Very seldom during the war were we so close to overwhelming success. The best troops in Europe, exultant with victory, feeling they had established complete mastery over their opponents, backed by ample reserves, were advancing once more. Although we could not know the straits to which the Germans were reduced, it was clear they were visibly weakening, the sun was shining and the going was now comparatively good over ground no longer cratered with shell-holes. It seemed as if nothing could stop us.

The Canadians attained their last objective, the Brown Line, at 3.30 p.m. In spite of the long halt on the Blue Line the German defence was still completely disorganized. Everywhere, isolated or in groups, stunned and bewildered German infantrymen with no idea what had become of their units, and small parties of gunners, were caught dragging themselves back through the icy water of the communication trenches towards the last defensive line at the foot of the ridge.

The sense of defeat hung heavily over the German side. Whole battalions had disappeared, regimental headquarters and commanders were in the enemy's hands. The most stout-hearted had been eliminated. Those that were left, small leaderless groups of men from different units inextricably mixed, had no great mind to fight.

It was clear that the First Army had achieved an important victory. All its objectives save that on the extreme left had been captured. There the 4th Canadian Division was still held up. In spite of its

most gallant efforts, Hill 145 remained in the enemy's hands. The Canadians occupying the first German trenches were too close to the enemy for the bombardment to be resumed without serious risk, and great difficulty was experienced in bringing trench-mortars and Stokes guns into action.

Preparations were being made to launch a fresh attack against the obdurate hill with a reserve brigade, when the Army Commander intervened. He instructed the Canadian Corps Commander not to hurry the attack or undertake it without adequate preparation. It was accordingly postponed till next day. The attack on either bank of the Souchez river was also postponed.

The First Army had to all intents and purposes fulfilled its allotted task, the way lay clear before it, and it seems a thousand pities that the Army Commander did not suggest nor G.H.Q. order a further advance. It would have been easy at little risk and small cost to outflank and clear away the enemy still holding up the divisions immediately to the south of the First Army, but this was not done.

The boldest measure taken was that a cavalry regiment was placed at the disposal of the Canadian Corps by the First Army, and two patrols of the Canadian Light Horse were sent out towards Willerval; one entered the village but was driven out by machine-gun fire, losing half its numbers; the other, comprising six men only, approached the village from the south and suffered more heavily still. There were occasional reports of impending counter-attacks during the afternoon, but none of these alarms materialized. We did not know, unfortunately, that in rear of the seemingly doomed *79th Reserve Division* there was only part of a Pioneer company occupying the last defensive trench of the Vimy system, running north from the village at the foot of the western slope of the ridge. There was not a soul between those few men and the Oppy-Méricourt line, over three miles eastwards. This defensive system was completely undefended. Nor had the enemy the least chance of getting a man or a gun there in time to oppose us if we pushed on. A single machine-gun defended the entrance to the plain near Petit Vimy. Farther north, two posts of six men each under an N.C.O. stood stubbornly by a heavy artillery battery, long since abandoned by its gunners, sniping at our patrols. That was all. The country as far back as the Drocourt-Quéant line was empty. When darkness fell, giving the enemy at last his opportunity to counter-attack, all he could do was to send forward eight companies with orders to

recapture the height above Thélus. It had been intended that these troops should carry what was left of the garrison forward with them, but they found so few that they were themselves absorbed in the weak and exhausted line of the defence. All they succeeded in doing was to drive some Canadian detachments from Vimy village.

It is never possible in war to tell where a break will occur, but to disdain an opportunity because it does not fall in with a pre-arranged plan is a grave error even in the most stereotyped form of warfare. To fail in the aggressiveness and grasp of a situation which leads a commander to hurl his troops at any point at which the enemy is holding out, whether it be within his allotted zone of action or not, is to abdicate the claim to be a great captain. Counsels of extreme prudence prevailed, due in the main to the difficulty of estimating the true position at distant headquarters. There can be no doubt also that some of the responsibility for the failure to reap complete success lay with divisional and brigade commanders, who did not quite rise to the occasion and initiate manœuvres outside and beyond the plan laid down. But is it fair to blame them? Few had ever had the opportunity of taking part in manœuvres at home.

It might be advanced as an explanation of our caution that we believed (and were right in believing) that the enemy had nine divisions resting somewhere in the back area, and we could not possibly know that, as it turned out, they were too far from the battle front to be available that day. But what we did know was that our field guns now ensconced on the Vimy Ridge could infallibly dispose of any large formations that might advance across the flat country stretching at our feet. We also knew that our strength in artillery was such, and the observation so good, that the enemy could not carry out any serious counter-attack from the wooded heights north-east of the ridge. It was true that we could not guess that the *79th Reserve Division* had only seventeen guns fit to fire out of its original twelve batteries; on the other hand there was practically no artillery fire on our front, and the only German shelling of any account was from heavy guns far to the north about Liéven, which were doing as much harm to their own people as to us. One thing in fact was obvious: the German line on the Canadian front was broken, and the survivors of the beaten troops who had been driven helter skelter off the ridge could not possibly turn about and retake it.

Roughly speaking, by nightfall the only reinforcements that the

*79th Division* had received were some three battalions and the value of about eleven companies, many of which were made up of odd details. We probably had a superiority of ten to one in fresh, fit, victorious troops supported by an overwhelmingly more powerful artillery. It is a matter of justifiable regret that in these circumstances we did not advance to the Méricourt line during the afternoon. Had we done so we would have found it unoccupied and could have pushed the cavalry on as far the Drocourt-Quéant line, where, turning south, it could have taken in the rear the defenders holding us up before Arras. The resulting disorganization of the German communications would certainly have had the widest repercussions; but this was not to be. The infantry, instead of bolting what defenders remained out of the last trenches they held so precariously at the foot of the Vimy Ridge, and clearing a way to the plain beyond for the large force of cavalry which should have been in readiness to take advantage of the situation, was content to push patrols through the woods on the eastern slopes of the ridge. Some of them reached the railway without opposition. Time, and his twin, Opportunity, slipped unchallenged and unobserved past our tired and well satisfied troops.

To the north the 3rd Canadian Division had a flank thrown back to join the 4th. To the south the 1st had also formed a defensive flank for the purpose of maintaining touch with the 51st Division. This division, on the extreme left of the Third Army, which had had such difficulty in gaining the Blue Line, found progress beyond it even harder.

Neither the 51st nor the 34th, next in line, captured the Brown Line. It was not till next morning (April 10th) that these divisions gained a footing in it, and it was only completely occupied when the enemy evacuated it voluntarily on the night of the 10th-11th.

The 9th Division on the right of the XVII Corps, attacking north of the Scarpe, progressed easily and swiftly. This was all the more satisfactory since the German wire in front of the Brown Line about Point du Jour was scarcely damaged and was negotiated with difficulty even though there was no opposition.

Observers noted that the advance of this division on the third objective was an extraordinarily fine sight. It was far more like a review on Salisbury Plain than a battle, as line after line of men, their rifles at the slope, marched steadily up the incline towards the Brown Line. The Germans did not await them. Vacating trenches protected by uncut wire and pillboxes, they ran. This was too

much even for the stolid Scots. It was impossible to hold them, barrage or no barrage. The officers shouted *view halloos* and, setting the example, raced forward followed by their men. At one moment, owing to the right of the 34th having been delayed by the enemy at Maison Blanche Wood, a gap developed between it and the 9th. Major Ewing in his most valuable account of the action of this division tells how a company of the K.O.S B's was sent forward to fill it. Coming up in great style they rushed a machine-gun responsible for most of the trouble, killed the team and devoured their lunch.

From Point du Jour the ground sloped more steeply to the east. Our men could see from here the plain below swarming with fleeing Germans. Through glasses Monchy and the ground south of the Scarpe were clearly visible, and it seemed as if there too, miles away, the enemy was in full retreat.

At this moment a telephone conversation recorded by Colonel Croft took place which is of great interest. It proves that some at least *grasped the situation*. 'Are the Boches on the run?' asked the Brigadier. 'Ycs.' 'Is cavalry good business?' 'Yes, ten thousand times ycs, but it must be done now. Too late to-morrow.'

Looking back towards their own lines, the Scotsmen realized the strength of the position they had captured. Immediately below them the glaxis over which they had advanced offered no cover whatever. Arras, a beautiful outline, lay bare and exposed to view, every movement near the town visible.

The success of the 9th Division was in every way well deserved. The troops composing it had shown great dash, and the commanders had displayed both resource and initiative. They had put into practice the precept that it is as important to help your neighbours as yourself. The artillery had been as well commanded as the infantry. Only one criticism was levelled at it that day: the foot soldiers complained that the barrage had been too slow.

With the capture of the Brown Line the task of this division was over. The 4th Division (which was to leap-frog over it) had been moving up steadily. It had suffered some casualties from shell-fire as it advanced beyond the first objective, but this had not delayed the forward movement. The heads of its columns were in touch with the 9th Division half an hour before the latter attacked the Brown Line. At 3.10 p.m. the 4th Division, passing through the

## THE BATTLE OF ARRAS



*(top)* ATHIES

*(bottom)* CAPTURED GERMAN GUNS IN ACTION



9th on the Brown Line, advanced against the Green Line and captured it without difficulty.

Fampoux on the Scarpe, six thousand yards from our starting line, was occupied without much loss by General Carton de Wiart's brigade. This was the farthest point we reached on the whole battle front.

A German N.C.O. has left a curious account of this stage of our advance.

Red flares indicated to the enemy guns where the front line was, their planes were flying from 100 to 200 metres high. The English stood fully exposed for half an hour, then formed into what from a flank looked like a thick column in front of the captured trenches. We were astonished to see that to either side of this column two rows of men were extended. These, covering a front of some five hundred to six hundred metres, calmly set about planting a row of black, white and red flags. The head of the column came to a halt in the middle of these flags. During this parade exercise, which lasted from thirty to forty minutes, isolated English could be seen coming up from the captured position. All this was carried out in such a leisurely fashion, so calmly and with such complete disregard of anything we might do, as to be quite incomprehensible to us. We simply could not understand why our guns did not fire at this magnificent target. The English columns then advanced, extending into very dense waves which came forward slowly. Our machine-guns began to fire from all sides.

Two other Germans had the unique experience of standing by the side of the Athies-Fampoux road and watching our troops marching down it. They were not prisoners, although quite ready to surrender, but no one, to their astonishment, paid the least attention to them. They gazed in wonder at our battalions marching along in step, the men smoking their pipes as unconcernedly as if they were taking part in a field day and not in a battle, no more interested in the small enemy audience than if they had been little boys sitting on a gate at home. These enemy soldiers somehow regained their own lines along the Scarpe and lived to tell a story their compatriots found it hard to believe.<sup>1</sup>

At 4.15 G.H.Q. ordered the 1st Cavalry Division to place one brigade at the disposal of the XVII Corps to operate on the front of

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 1 (page 591).



the 4th Division. The 1st Cavalry Brigade was designated and was in readiness to move at a moment's notice, but most unfortunately nothing further happened. Night fell, and the cavalry twelve miles behind the battle front was still waiting for orders.

When a critical study is made of the battle with all available material, it may well be found that of many opportunities offered and missed that day, the most promising and that which might have yielded the greatest results was a break-through between Bailleul and Fampoux. The former was not only the key of the German positions between Vimy Ridge and the Scarpe, it was also the most vulnerable point, for although determined machine-gunners had held up the 51st and 34th Divisions, the German infantry in front of the village had not stood their ground. Panic reports had spread, as such reports always do in similar circumstances; it was asserted that the British had broken through north of Bailleul and were advancing on the plain, having captured all the guns at the foot of the ridge. This news had been too much for the defenders of the Point du Jour, who fled. The rumour that the British cavalry were through about Willerval also caused consternation, so the venture-some patrols did not perhaps ride in vain after all. There were only left to oppose us in the vicinity of Point du Jour a couple of Pioneer companies, transport men and three companies of recruits from the divisional recruit depot.<sup>1</sup>

There remained until nightfall an open gap in the German line between Bailleul and Gavrelle, only filled precariously after dark by one battalion. This, with but little idea of where it was or of the general situation, expecting to be attacked at any moment, worked desperately all night to create some sort of a defensive line. So little did these troops know of the position that they dug their trenches facing *south*.

At the Headquarters of the *14th Bavarian Division* the situation was considered desperate, almost hopeless. There was not the least chance of any further support before midnight, when it was expected that a regiment from Army Reserve would arrive. On our side, satisfaction, blended perhaps with some astonishment at our success, may have helped to blind us to circumstances difficult no doubt to establish clearly but overwhelmingly favourable.<sup>2</sup>

The battle south of the Scarpe developed with little reference

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 2 (page 591).

<sup>2</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 3 (page 592).

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(top) CAVALRY WAITING FOR ORDERS  
(bottom) THE ARRAS-CAMBRAI ROAD



to that fought north of the river. The 15th Division was in the Brown Line by 4 p.m., but neither the 12th nor the 3rd Division got a footing in it owing to uncut wire.<sup>1</sup>

When the 15th Division reached the Brown Line at 4 p.m. there were still almost four hours of daylight. The 37th Division (the leap-frogging division south of the Scarpe) was advancing, and the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions were ordered forward by General Allenby between 3.30 and 4 p.m.

Following their own specially prepared tracks, the enormous mass of men and horses gradually spread out on either side of Tilloy. The squadrons broke up into small groups. The men, holding their horses by the bridles, taking what cover they could in the trenches, waited. An occasional German shell caused some casualties.

The 17th Division (the supporting division of the Cavalry Corps) stood to, awaiting the order to advance.<sup>2</sup> It was never used at all, yet its intervention would have been decisive.

This division was retained by the Army Commander, General Allenby, in his own hands until 6.50 p.m. when he placed it at the disposal of General Haldane, but by this time the area east of Arras was packed with cavalry. It would have been difficult if not impossible to bring such a large mass of infantry through Arras and past the cavalry in time to be of any use, and so General Haldane refused it.

Had this division advanced shoulder to shoulder with the 37th, there seems little doubt that the enormous mass of these two divisions would, considering the weakness of the defence, almost certainly have carried the attack to its ultimate objective.

In one respect the unfortunate cavalry, which might have played such a decisive rôle had it followed instead of preceded the 17th Division, was lucky in that the Germans had neither guns to fire nor planes to see with; for this great assembly of horses only four thousand yards from the front presented an unheard-of target. The icy dusk found the cavalry still waiting. Snow-showers soaked the frozen men every quarter of an hour. Something had to be done about watering the horses. Had we broken through, this could have been done at the Cojeul river by Monchy. As it was there was nothing to do but to move back so as to carry out this necessary operation in rear.

By 8 p.m., when it was almost dark, the order to withdraw was given. It was very difficult to keep the horses to the cavalry tracks

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 4 (page 592).

<sup>2</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 5 (page 593).

and get them over the temporary bridges. They kept slipping on the melting snow and, as soon as they were off the tracks, were liable to become bogged. On the track itself at some points they were up to their hocks in mud. The congestion was frightful as the cavalry were met by a counter-stream of guns and ammunition coming up. The last brigade did not reach its destination till 3 a.m. and the horses had to remain in the open in what was now a continuous storm of snow.<sup>1</sup>

Night fell on the battlefield heralded by scurries of snow. An icy wind blowing with gale force swept over the soaking ground. Along the whole line from the Souchez to the Cojeul, British and Germans, drenched by driving sleet and snow, peered into the darkness with no very clear idea of where their opponents were lurking.

On our side of the ill-defined line separating friend from foe, great masses of troops huddled behind whatever shelter there was to be found; where there was none, men without greatcoats lay close to the ground, indeed they seemed to percolate into it, so great became the capacity born of need to worm themselves into any derelict trench, dug-out or hole capable of giving the least protection. Runners, never less appropriately named, felt their way from point to point, from man to man, carrying messages, endeavouring to establish contact between front line and supporting troops. Signallers, confronting a task that would have baffled Ariadne, were trying to lay lines across the muddy labyrinth. Floundering, exhausted pack-horses, led by men asking their way, were bringing up ammunition, stores of all kinds and food.

Stretcher-bearers moved slowly and continuously about. Wounded men hobbled or crawled, asking passing shadows to direct them to the dressing stations. The bitter cold allowed little or no sleep to our tired men in the front line as they crouched in shell-holes or half-dug trenches on the ground they had conquered. But if they were weary, what was their fatigue compared with their opponents'? These men were not only weary to death, they were desperate. They had been beaten, and now all but the look-out men were digging for dear life, knowing that not a man, hardly a gun was behind them, while close by, somewhere in the inky darkness from which they might spring at any moment, were massed an overwhelmingly superior enemy.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXIX, §6 (page 594).

Disconnected posts of Germans, lost to their chiefs, completely unaware of the general situation and knowing little or nothing of what or where the troops to either side of them might be, waited in utter exhaustion, frozen hands on muddy rifles or machine-guns, for the white glint of bayonets, the flash of steel whiter than the white snow driving into their faces, that would be, they knew, the only announcement they would have that the British were upon them. The minutes of that terrible night added up slowly into hours, piling up physical suffering and mental anguish such as only men made of the sternest stuff could resist. But the attack never came.

Everywhere, in spite of the overwhelming defeat they had suffered, the Germans still in line showed the same grim determination to hang on.

It must have seemed to them that only luck so fabulous as hardly to be hoped for could save them from death, unless indeed they threw up the sponge. But, all honour to them, this appears never to have crossed their minds.

At the back, by desolate wayside stations, reinforcements were detrainig. Every effort was being made by the enemy to reorganize their artillery, stray guns were being collected and grouped, munitions were coming up, though in many cases under conditions very unsatisfactory to the gunners.

The German artillery supply columns were attached to the sectors and not to the batteries, and so did not feel they were identified with them. When caught by sporadic bursts of shell-fire, they were apt to throw out their loads at points no nearer their destination than prudence dictated, with the result that the gunners had first to find the heaps of tipped-out shells in open fields or by the side of the roads and then somehow drag them forward to the guns. All night the Staffs worked desperately to locate this or that detachment so as to send it to fill some newly-revealed gap in the nebulous ill-defined fighting line.

The Germans may well be proud of the fight they put up that day. Ample heroism on the part of those who refused to fall back atoned for the weakness of others. Lack of fibre was under the circumstances understandable if not excusable, but the grit, the refusal to accept defeat of those who fought on when their only prospect was death and their only counsellor despair, who refused to save their lives by the easy means of surrender or retreat, is beyond all praise.

That same night, far removed from the snow-swept battlefield where horses were dying of cold where they stood, in a warm well-lit room at Kreuznach, the German G.H.Q., Marshal von Hindenburg was reading the reports from the Arras front as they came in. The picture presented was a dark one, many shadows, little light. General Ludendorff came in. It was, he tells us, his birthday. The Marshal turned to him and taking his hand said, 'Well, we have lived through worse than this, you and I. My confidence remains unbroken'.

Ludendorff did not feel so hopeful. He had awaited with confidence the result of the battle he knew was impending, but he confessed that the news from the front as it trickled in overwhelmed him. Were the carefully elaborated principles underlying the 'defensive battle' unsound? Was this defeat the reward of so much work and planning during the last three months? If so he had made a terrible mistake. His own description of the situation was that 'it was extremely critical and could have become dangerous to our whole line of battle in France had the enemy pursued his action. But the English were content with their great success, and, on April 9th at least, did not pursue their attacks.'

As he reflected on the battle, Ludendorff came to the conclusion that his instructions were not at fault. He formed the opinion, which was shared by General von K  hl, Prince Rupprecht's Chief of Staff, that the defeat was due to the fact that the *Sixth Army* reserves were too far back, in contravention of the principles laid down by the Supreme Command. Not only had the *Sixth Army* failed to conform to the spirit of the new German system of defence as conceived by Ludendorff, but Prince Rupprecht, its Commander, had disobeyed the direct orders which he had been sent telling him to bring up his reserves closer to the line.

#### APRIL 10TH

Although there was still to be much fighting on the Arras front and substantial gains were realized, the effort was spent, and the lost opportunities did not recur.

The heaviest snowfalls of the whole winter occurred on the 10th, 11th and 12th. Indeed the weather remained very bad until the 20th. The continuous snow and rain very soon turned those parts of the battlefield that had been under heavy shell-fire into quagmires. To move guns, especially heavy artillery and transport, under these

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conditions was very difficult. Many horses and mules died of fatigue combined with exposure. Rations had been reduced to allow of the transport of a greater number of shells, and this told heavily on the draft animals, whose condition was pitiable. Many fell in the traces never to rise again. Dead or dying horses lying by the tracks were a common sight. The cavalry suffered even more severely than the transport. In one cavalry brigade (the 5th) 130 horses died of exhaustion and exposure compared with 347 killed and wounded.

In spite of the abominable weather, our airmen remained up. Although the buffeting they received was such that many pilots suffered from air-sickness and had to be medically treated on landing, they succeeded in retaining complete mastery of the air.

On the 10th, along the greater part of the front the day was spent in fortifying ourselves against possible counter-attacks, a wise, but as it turned out hardly a necessary precaution, for the German reserves were only coming up slowly. Those that did reach the foot of Vimy could not move by day. The enemy's front line was held only by oddments including Pioneers and Tunnelling Companies. Of the troops who had fought on the 9th very few, according to the Germans themselves, were capable even of keeping a look-out. They found it impossible to relieve the exhausted stupefied men strung out along their new and very precarious line of defence. In many cases thirty men were all that could be mustered to hold a company front. Nevertheless their line, however weak, was defended by numerous machine-guns and by an artillery that had been to some extent reorganized.

Our main difficulty was the condition of the ground. It was only possible to bring up some of the field guns and none of the heavies on to the Vimy Ridge. Not until a week later were any of the latter in position. To press home the attack in the northern sector with our weary men would undoubtedly have been costly. Counsels of prudence again prevailed and only minor operations took place.<sup>1</sup>

That night the *11th German Division* was relieved by the *26th*. It had lost one hundred and five officers and three thousand one hundred and fifty-four men.

For the enemy this was a day of intense though unfulfilled apprehension. There was not a single solid point in the shifting sands of their beaten line upon which they could anchor their resistance. Reading their accounts of the battle, I have failed to find a cheerful

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 7 (page 595).

note, save when we are told how the garrison of Monchy-le-Preux, who had felt they were abandoned by their guns, suddenly saw some batteries gallop up and unlimber behind the village; there was also joy when one of our tanks advancing down the Arras-Clambrai road was hit by a shell and caught fire, turning, so the German account runs, into a crematorium for its team. These seem to have been the only consolations vouchsafed our enemies, whose best hope was that their reserves would appear before they were overwhelmed by our constantly expected attack. But the anxious hours passed without the huge British mass making any attempt to heave itself forward. The Germans were too thankful to wonder why our army seemed to have sunk into the mud, or to seek an explanation of why the cavalry showed up between snow-flurries. Save for sporadic attempts to advance here and there, our front line remained pinned to the ground, and, strangest of all, in the distance individuals or parties could be seen through glasses, wandering about with complete unconcern as if the war were over.

As the light failed, our opponents set about reinforcing their line, withdrawing the units that had suffered most, and our own men prepared to face another deadly freezing night. There was not even the possibility of creeping into dug-outs where such existed. Strict orders had been issued that these were on no account to be occupied, for hurriedly though the Germans had retired they had found time to place explosive charges with delay-action fuses in many of them. On the front of the 12th Division alone twelve such explosions occurred within the first twelve hours after the Brown Line had been captured.

A disappointing day, proving the truth of a note made at the time by one of our corps commanders, which is now before me, that the operation showed there were too many young and ignorant officers for our divisions to do more than carry out carefully planned attacks. Faced with an unrehearsed situation they were lost. He might have added that our Staffs, composed largely of amateurs, also failed for lack of experience and military training. It is also true that several commanders showed lack of initiative and inability to grasp the situation. A country that may be involved in great wars but does not prepare for them must not cavil at such shortcomings. These are inevitable when there are insufficient numbers of trained officers to choose from, and inadequate opportunities to practise the art of war in large-scale manoeuvres.

## APRIL 11TH

The 11th, memorable for the capture of Monchy-le-Preux, was otherwise a disappointing day. Nothing occurred on the Vimy Ridge, where the 4th Canadian Division was making ready to capture The Pimple, the high point on the northern extremity of the ridge that gave the enemy observation westwards and afforded him cover to launch attacks against the Canadian left flank.

As for the Third Army, General Allenby told his corps commanders that 'a stagnant battle was to be avoided', but it was difficult to set in motion once more, in the face of growing opposition, the great machine, so many of whose wheels were clogged by the all-pervading oozing mud.<sup>1</sup>

The capture of the important position of Monchy is of special interest because of the co-operation of cavalry and infantry in the attack. I have thought it worth while to give a short account of this operation in an appendix.<sup>2</sup>

Although this was a wasted day from our point of view, it was one which, so one German account tells us, was characterized by an exhibition of true British tenacity. Doggedly our men tried and tried again to press their opponents back, with but small results until evening, when German reinforcements appeared at different points and the line froze into immobility under the falling snow.<sup>3</sup>

It was on the 11th also that General Gough's Fifth Army, to the south of the Arras battle front, was in its turn launched to the attack.

An account of this engagement, the Battle of Bullecourt, in which the Australians displayed magnificent courage, but which was a very costly failure, is given as an appendix.<sup>4</sup>

## APRIL 12TH

On the 12th, the 24th Division, attacking north of the Souchez river, drove the enemy out of the celebrated Bois en Hache on the Vimy front. Another considerable achievement was the capture of The Pimple by British and Canadian troops.

Not the least obstacle the attacking troops had to negotiate was the steep muddy slopes they had to climb. This they did in the teeth of the usual snowstorm, to find themselves faced by a regiment

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 8 (page 598).

<sup>2</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 9 (page 598).

<sup>3</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 10 (page 601).

<sup>4</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 11 (page 604).

of the German *Guard Grenadiers*, which had been brought down from the north the day before to defend this important point. Blown and tired though they were, for even the shortest distances covered under such conditions were exhausting, our men beat the *Guard* back foot by foot after a severe struggle in a maze of trenches honeycombed by deep dug-outs.

This success, which deprived the enemy of all observation and made it possible for us to watch his every movement, led him to renounce finally the idea of recapturing Vimy Ridge. Nothing else of importance happened on the front of the First Army.

On the Third Army front, patrols of the 34th Division found the southern edge of Bailleul unoccupied, but the Division did not push on. The men were very weary and exhausted from constant exposure, and a relief had been arranged. It took place next day under rather better weather conditions.<sup>1</sup>

South of the Scarpe, Heninel and Wancourt, which had been evacuated by the enemy, were occupied by us, and the divisions in line were relieved; that was all.<sup>2</sup>

#### APRIL 13TH

On the 13th, British lethargy, symptoms of which were already so noticeable on the evening of the 9th and which had become even more marked on the following days, showed every sign of turning into paralysis. 'It is not the intention of the Corps Commander to attack until adequate artillery support is available,' ran the Canadian order. Nevertheless we did advance almost in spite of ourselves, for it was found that the enemy had evacuated a large area on the extreme left of the Canadians, displaying every sign of haste. Some guns, including a few of large calibre, were captured, and prisoners declared their people to be in a very demoralized condition. These facts which, one might have supposed, would have suggested action only inspired greater prudence. On the other hand, it was at last found possible to bring up the guns, and a determined attempt was made by the 3rd Division south of the Scarpe to capture Guemappe.

<sup>1</sup> The relieving division (the 2nd), now responsible for the front originally held by both the 51st and 34th Divisions, passed through Bailleul unopposed, pushing patrols towards Gavrelle.

<sup>2</sup> On this day some genius devised a means of conveying guns across the old trench system on the light Decauville railway. Until this was done it had been found absolutely impossible to bring guns forward on some parts of the battlefield.

The next division to the south was to have co-operated but failed to do so.

Although supported by 140 pieces, this attack on a narrow front against the village, now turned into a fortress, failed. It was decided in consequence that, as no large reinforcements could be expected for some time, the Third Army should give up for the moment all idea of large-scale operations. Ground was to be gained by deliberate methods and the Monchy position consolidated. Guemappe and ground east of the Cojeul river, including the villages of Vis-en-Artois and Boiry-Notre-Dame, were to be captured if possible. The cavalry was withdrawn west of Arras. The minor operations which took place on the 13th and 14th are given in an appendix.<sup>1</sup>

The Battle of Arras was now to all intents and purposes at an end. Although it was disappointing that overwhelming success was not achieved, it was a great victory, proclaimed as such by our allies, acknowledged by our foes. We had proved that we could crash our way through the German lines at their strongest points. More than 13,000 prisoners and 200 guns were captured, and the confidence of the Germans both in their plans and in some at least of their troops was shaken. The action was a vindication of Haig's pertinacity and of the wisdom of his decision to include the Vimy Ridge in his attack. He had more than fulfilled the part assigned him in the great Nivelle scheme. The Germans were forced to pour men and guns into the gap we had made, and to strain their resources in an endeavour to complete and strengthen rapidly the Drocourt-Quéant line.

So successful was the British offensive in drawing the German reserves that, in spite of their heavy losses, ten days after the battle their strength on the Arras front was nearly double what it had been on the 9th.

If we, an army largely composed of amateurs, made mistakes, they were trifling compared with those committed by our opponents, who possessed the greatest war-machine the world had ever known. The weather, too, handicapped us more than it did the enemy. The morass of the battlefield paralysed the advance of our guns, ammunition and supplies, while the enemy were moving, as far as their back areas were concerned, over comparatively unbroken

<sup>1</sup> Appendix XXIX, § 12 and 19 (pages 611-12).

ground. Again, their reserve and draught animals could be kept under shelter while ours had none. It must nevertheless be recognized that although our army of 1917 was a splendid weapon, full of life and ardour, perfectly competent to carry out a set piece, it was hardly capable of manoeuvring under conditions approximating to those of open warfare. Some divisions were better than others; the enemy bears testimony that boldly-led battalions and companies compelled them to retire time and time again; but in the main we suffered from our lack of trained officers both on the Staff and with units.

As a cavalry officer, I cannot but feel the deepest regret that my old arm was so mishandled. There seems to be absolutely no doubt from the evidence of infantry officers, both of the 9th and 4th Divisions, that cavalry detachments could have got through on their fronts on the afternoon of the 9th. It is deplorable that instead of this being attempted the division north of the river was held so far back as to be useless, while south of it great masses of horsemen clogged the advance of both infantry and guns.

It was a grave fault not to have pressed home the attack along the whole front on the 10th. It seems to me that at least one reason why this was not done was a psychological one. I am sorry to have to say it, but looking back after many years and taking an infinite number of incidents into account, I am forced to the conclusion that our more responsible commanders were too respectful of each other's prerogatives, too conscious of a common background, too indulgent, and also too much aware of the characteristic defects of individuals to thwart them otherwise than reluctantly, too gentlemanly, in fact, to exercise much more pressure than the head of a school would exercise upon the captains of the different games. Our generals as a rule lacked the ruthlessness, the complete disregard of individuals, the iron hand, the steeled soul and the drive which some of their French colleagues possessed. Such qualities are certainly necessary characteristics of a great captain.

The attitude of our commanders towards each other was no doubt also responsible for the etiquette that prevented a general from jumping an echelon and viewing the situation otherwise than through the eyes of his immediate subordinates. This inevitably had a delaying effect, a single sticky leader slowing up the whole machine. The French were better organized than we were in this respect, the liaison officers of each staff having free and un-

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(top) ARTILLERY MOVING 'UP' THROUGH 'ARRAS





disputed right of access to every point in the line. They were the eyes of the general who sent them, and with knowledge of the situation they could insist upon the orders of their chief being carried out, whereas the English commander who did not dispose of specialized liaison officers and could ill spare members of his Staff, himself tied to his H.Q., could only direct his subordinates on the basis of their own reports. With us there was no liaison officer to convey to a commander an independent impression after a personal reconnaissance. Even in the case of evident failure, our generals could only draw their conclusions as to whether the excuse given was valid or not from the explanations of the commander concerned.

G.H.Q. was too aloof and too distant to exercise real control. The few officers sent out from there had not the status to influence decisions, and many Army Commanders resented their intrusion.

The system was of G.H.Q.'s own choosing; it must therefore bear a portion, perhaps the main portion, of the blame for the fact that the 10th was a wasted day. Pressure should have been maintained at all costs. At the time we did not know, nor could we have known, how precariously the enemy held his ground and how easily a determined push would have knocked him off his balance, but some facts we were aware of: the enemy had reacted nowhere; he did not counter-attack; his artillery fire was ineffective; these were sure signs of weakness and disorganization, proof that the reserves we knew he could muster were not yet available.

The fact is that the victory we had won surprised our commanders. They were so unused to success on such a scale that they seem to have been completely taken aback by it. Satisfaction at the results accomplished seems to have led to a certain complacency, and in many cases to a reluctance to press on the weary men to further effort. There are occasions in war, and this was one of them, when it is the duty of a commander to drive his men beyond all ordinary powers of endurance. As the Germans say, 'sweat saves blood'. There are times when by sheer force of his will he must impel the troops, exhausted and bewildered by fatigue, towards the goal he has set; when the hungry must go unfed, the frozen remain without shelter, the dying be left to die by comrades who must press on. There are moments when those who have fallen from exhaustion must get up and run, and hours when men who have not slept for days must keep watch or die. Such must be the spirit and the will of him who will win in war, a spirit exemplified by the well-known case of the French

officer who, grievously wounded, and the enemy counter-attacking, rose calling to his men: '*Debout les Morts*'.

But if certain criticisms may legitimately be levelled at commanders for not having exploited to the full their own great achievements, it is surely only right to point out that some responsibility must rest upon those who governed the country in pre-war days. If the cadres of our army were insufficient, if our trained staff officers were few and our commanders lacked the experience of handling large masses of men, does not the blame rest with Parliament and successive Governments, who, knowing we might be involved in war, starved our tiny army in peace-time, allowing it to train with skeleton forces at inadequate manœuvres? Our regiments were homogeneous bodies, our regimental officers the best in the world, but our army was small, scattered, untrained as a united force, and therefore remained for a long time little more than a conglomeration of units, although these were of unequalled valour and fighting capacity.

The small B.E.F. had been superbly equipped; Haldane had served the country well by creating an effective Territorial force, but statesmen had indulged in the pleasing illusion that there is such a thing as a limited liability war, one in which we need not engage more than the small force it suited us to maintain in peace-time. Surely no great foresight was required to realize that, when there was a possibility of having to fight a great European power, the result of defeat might be our extinction as a nation? To avoid such a calamity, no effort by responsible leaders should have been spared, no sacrifice by the people deemed too heavy.

At Arras, as on every other battlefield during the first part of the war, history was but repeating itself. The valour of British soldiers on the battlefield was being expended to compensate for the lack of courage in England's political leaders, who, in fear of the electorate which they found it easier not to enlighten, allowed her to embark, inadequately prepared and bewildered by the effort she had to make, on the greatest war in history.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The casualties of the First, Third and Fifth Armies in April and May were as follows: killed, 29,505; wounded, 108,279; missing, 20,876—a total of 158,660.

The German figures, which are unreliable and do not include lightly wounded, are 85,000 for the *Sixth Army* alone. We captured 257 guns.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE POLITICAL FRONT: THE AUSTRIAN PEACE PROPOSALS

HAVING watched the British Army, like a car driven into a morass, gradually lose impetus and finally stop, its engine clogged with mud, we must now turn to the Franco-British political machine whose wheels have meanwhile been whirring round with impressive but spasmodic energy.

Democracy is a curious thing. In times of peace, at the heart of the imposing structure controlling great fleets, vast armies, millions of subject races, is a vast hall, generally almost empty, in which a single individual is always talking. This chamber where a still small voice is for ever holding forth is known as Parliament, the supreme court of the sovereign people, which tirelessly forges with verbal tools links in the endless chain of laws that bind the nations.

Now, in time of war, although the outward form remained, forces of immeasurable strength and uncontrollable violence had taken charge. The men to whom the people were used to look for guidance found themselves just like other men, small, puzzled, bewildered, facing a cataclysm their minds could not grasp. Ministers had a little the aspect of marionettes presented without the familiar surroundings of footlights and wings. Their usual animators, well-drilled civil servants, were powerless to actuate them on a stage for which neither experience nor training had equipped them, and the strings usually taut in their hands lay in skeins tangled beyond all unravelling. Such at least is my impression when I look back on the events of 1917 and recall the familiar figures of the great men of that day. They seem very inconsequent, very well-meaning, dealing with the war as they would have dealt with unexpected, tiresome or alarming happenings in their own lives. They did their tremulous fluttering best while the guns roared at Arras and endless troop-trains bore towards the Aisne the numberless actors for the play whose curtain was about to be rung up. They talked, consulted, dined and travelled, worried, but in spite of everything had their moments of relaxation; in fact they more or less lived through the experience of a man whose business is facing

a long-drawn-out crisis, which may with luck, skill and determination be surmounted, but which often gives little hope of ending otherwise than in failure and bankruptcy.

The rather futile figure of Monsieur Painlevé appears particularly pathetic at this time, and the little world in which he moved, made up of his personal staff and of colleagues on whose support he could only half rely, seems strangely unreal. All his more important actions and much of what he said are on record, but they only serve to emphasize the difference between the stark reality of the fighting line and the dream world of the home front. Enmeshed in events he could not control, not knowing what to do for the best, more worried on reflection than he had been at the time by the result of the Compiègne Conference, he decided to confer with the British Prime Minister.

He arrived in London on April 9th, the day of the British attack. The night before he left Paris, General Henry Wilson had dined with him at the Ritz, General Smuts joining them later. General Wilson exuded cheerfulness. With deep chuckles and cavernous guffaws he expatiated on the forthcoming discomfiture of the Boche; but even cloaked in Irish humour this echo of General Nivelle's optimism jarred on Painlevé, and it certainly failed to dispel the gloomy picture of the Aisne escarpment that his tortured mind constantly evoked. General Smuts, when he came, depressed him further. The South African developed with much force and cogency the argument that French and British should come to a clear understanding as to what each wanted, before peace discussions were started. What was to be done with Constantinople?

The little Frenchman must have looked vague, vaguer than usual, for he told me afterwards that this talk of Constantinople had the effect of making the Chemin des Dames seem to rise and grow into an impassable obstacle beyond which shimmered, unattainable, the city on the Bosphorus.

Painlevé was conferring with Lloyd George at 10 Downing Street when the first good news of the British attack came through. The initial objectives had been captured, the armies were progressing. Some months later, on another journey to London, Painlevé told me about the interview. He said that this report had the magical effect of placing rose-coloured spectacles on everyone's nose and of filling the dark London room with light.

The atmosphere in which the two statesmen met was propitious.



THE CHEMIN DES DAMES



The Frenchman, already completely bewitched by Mr. Lloyd George's charm, under a spell that was to last as long as they worked together, felt a growing optimism that had certainly been absent when he arrived in London. This mood was encouraged by our Prime Minister, for he was aware of the General Staff's anxiety lest the French Government should call off their offensive, and nothing could have been more fatal to the plan he had fostered than such a decision. The British Army was under French command. It was playing, and evidently playing successfully, the part allotted to it by General Nivelle. If the French were to cry off now, leaving the British attack *en l'air*, it would not only be very serious from the military point of view, involving the waste of an enormous effort and even more valuable time, but it would also mean the complete collapse of the policy Mr. Lloyd George had persuaded the Cabinet to adopt.

Painlevé gave the Prime Minister an account of the Compiègne Conference. Mr. Lloyd George must have felt some anxiety about this, for conflicting reports had reached London concerning it. Painlevé did his best to reassure him, telling him that the consideration that weighed most with the French Government was not to let the British Army down. He was a very honest man and was certainly sincere when he said this; but the fact is, as has been seen, that not a word concerning the British and their attack was said by the politicians during the conference.

It may have occurred to Mr. Lloyd George as he listened that, however tactfully the story might be told, it threw into strong relief the fact that the ultimate control of the operations rested not with General Nivelle but with the French Government. The Compiègne Conference was the inevitable result of the earlier one held at Calais. The seed planted at Calais bore fruit at Compiègne. The British forces were under the orders of the French Commander-in-Chief, but the French Commander-in-Chief was under the control of the French Cabinet, who, in an emergency such as had occurred, did not hesitate to use their powers without reference to the British Government. It was now quite evident that our Cabinet had abdicated its powers in favour not of a French general but of the French Government. It could have occurred to no one that the French Ministers would do anything wittingly which would imperil the British forces that played so vital a part in a struggle involving France's very existence; but they could not help viewing the position through French eyes. Inevitably, and from their point of view



quite rightly, they placed the interests of their country and their army before ours.

Monsieur Painlevé did not conceal from Mr. Lloyd George his grave doubts concerning General Nivelle's plan since the German withdrawal had fundamentally altered the situation, nor the anxiety the persistent bad weather was causing him. Mr. Lloyd George, who still had great faith in General Nivelle, took quite a strong line in urging his French colleague not to intervene. His views impressed his hearer, and the news of the British success gave them additional weight. What justification could there be for the French to hold back or delay when their allies had broken through defences which the Grand Quartier Général had declared to be impregnable?

The next question discussed was the German submarine campaign, and its effects were frankly stated by Mr. Lloyd George. Although Painlevé was fairly conversant with the position, the figures revealed by the British Prime Minister came as a shock to him. The situation at sea, said Mr. Lloyd George, had never been worse. The Allied and neutral shipping losses for March amounted to some 500,000 tons, a figure far in excess of any possible replacements. (It rose to 825,000 tons in April.)

Monsieur Painlevé also had an unpleasant surprise when American intervention came up for discussion. Although aware of the military unpreparedness of the United States, he was taken aback when told of the difficulty there would be in transporting the troops she could eventually mobilize. This piece of information served to confirm him in his determination to husband French resources, since it must mean that France still had a long struggle ahead of her.

If this news was depressing, showing only too clearly that there was no wide margin separating Britain from starvation, Mr. Lloyd George was able to convince Monsieur Painlevé, from very reliable information in his possession, that the British blockade was closing its invisible, deadly grip on the Central Powers. The food supplies of both Great Britain and Germany were seriously threatened, but Mr. Lloyd George stated emphatically that however great England's danger might be at the moment, the steps the Government was taking would quite certainly enable us to overcome our present difficulties, whereas there was no escape for the Germans from the slow, unrelenting pressure of our blockade.

Mr. Lloyd George's firmness in face of the danger greatly impressed the French Minister. He was further comforted by the assurance

that, having taken full account of our shipping losses, the Prime Minister could, he said, assert with complete confidence that the German submarines would never starve us. Every available acre of land in Great Britain was to be placed under cultivation, and soon the country would almost be able to feed its inhabitants. 'We will cut down our forests, extract all the coal and iron from our soil; we will never give up the fight', he declared.

Brave words, bravely spoken, which represented the true feelings of the nation, and we owe gratitude to Mr. Lloyd George for having uttered them.

The Prime Minister's attitude was the more praiseworthy as the military authorities had warned him a short time before that the morale of the nation was causing them some anxiety. In their view disappointment, war-weariness and pacifism might greatly embarrass the Government if the military operations proved disappointing.

The Prime Minister was probably well aware that the idea was gaining ground in French political circles that Great Britain was no longer determined to pursue the war till the complete overthrow of Germany, but hoped to obtain an acceptable peace in 1917.

Fearing perhaps that the sombre picture of the submarine situation, together with the poor prospects of early American participation, might make his visitor, whose mood he had certainly gauged, take away a dangerously pessimistic impression, he added that even if Russia were beaten, American participation, however unprepared she was, would enable Great Britain to continue the war indefinitely. His programme had, he said, been drawn up without taking any account of military help from America.

Mr. Lloyd George's words had the desired effect. Any doubts Painlevé may have had concerning Great Britain's firmness were dispelled. He told me that he had carried away two main impressions from this interview. In the first place he grasped as he had never done before the overwhelming might of British sea power. French opinion was somewhat sceptical on the subject. There was hardly a man in France who realized the full implications of the factor that was in the end to win the war, a curious blind spot in a nation that has produced such splendid sailors, but explained by the fact that France has for centuries fought out her destiny with her back to the sea.

In the second place, he derived the greatest comfort and confidence from the assurances given him by Mr. Lloyd George of Great Britain's

unshakable resolution. 'This was exactly the moral tonic he needed, and he told me how much it had meant to him at that particular time. Any relief was welcome. When alone he was haunted by the sense of his responsibility and hardly dared think what the consequences of failure on the Aisne would mean.

At the end of the conversation, he touched upon the most delicate subject of all, Salonika. The Russo-Roumanian forces had fallen back on Moldavia, and Wallachia was lost. The attitude of the Greek Government was hostile. The British Government was labouring under a sense of grievance; it thought that General Sarrail should 'do something' and had complained to the War Office about the 'discreditable inactivity' on the Salonika front. This communication had drawn the dry rejoinder from the C.I.G.S. that, as the Government had decided that General Sarrail should exercise supreme command over the Allied forces in Salonika, the responsibility for the operations there rested with him and not with the British commander on the spot; both he and the British Staff at home were powerless; neither had any say in the matter. General Sarrail had so far elected to keep silence regarding his plans, added the War Office.

The fact was that the chronic muddle apparently inevitable in Salonika affairs was even worse than usual at the moment. General Milne knew little or nothing of General Sarrail's plans. The latter on his side had the insolence to let it be understood in Paris that he wondered whether he could rely upon British co-operation in his attack. Although Painlevé had telegraphed on his own initiative to Sarrail that he was to be ready to attack on April 15th, a piece of information the War Office would have been extremely glad to have, for some reason which I do not know he said nothing about it. He perhaps felt, and would have been justified in feeling, that this would have proved in a very obvious way that our large contingent in Salonika, like our armies in France, was in reality under the control of the French Cabinet. He was content to say that he understood Sarrail was about to attack, and asked that General Milne should be instructed to co-operate fully. He was assured by Mr. Lloyd George that he would. This appeared satisfactory enough, but the gloss laid over the real difficulties underlying the Salonika question did nothing to remove them; these were of both a political and a military nature and the two Ministers avoided them.

Neither Government was ever completely frank with the other

about Salonika, the simple truth being that candour was impossible because there were generally so many cross-currents on the subject within the two Cabinets that neither could state its collective opinion clearly.

*Beyond the decision to attack, the military situation of Sarrail's command was not discussed on this occasion.* It was characteristic of the way the war was conducted that a question of such gravity and complexity was settled without going into details, by a couple of Ministers who did not understand the strategic problem, the topography of the country, or each other's language.

There was, however, one matter on which the two statesmen found themselves at one without its being necessary for either to elaborate his ideas, and that was the importance of getting rid of King Constantine of Greece as soon as possible. Painlevé was a genuine republican and had no special respect for monarchy. The possible consequence of high-handed interference in the internal affairs of Greece alarmed him not at all. The French argument, sedulously fostered by General Sarrail, who appears to have spent rather more time studying the position in Athens than that on his own front, was that anything was better than to have a pro-German king behind the Allied front ready to stab the Allies in the back at the first opportunity. This point of view Painlevé heartily endorsed. The French believed implicitly in Venizelos and were prepared to back him to any extent. Painlevé pointed out the advantage of allowing Sarrail to invade Thessaly as soon as possible.

Painlevé gained the impression that Mr. Lloyd George shared his point of view, especially as regards the King, but was told there were some objections on the British side to the policy he had outlined. Venizelos was, it was true, much admired; but the Conservative members of the Cabinet were opposed to fostering a movement that might lead to deposing the King. The Italians also strongly objected to any tampering with the dynastic principle. As for the British General Staff, they were strongly in favour of pursuing a moderate policy. They based their arguments on the reports of our representatives in Athens, who were all of opinion that a policy of intervention in Greek affairs would inevitably lead to civil war and necessitate the occupation of the country by Allied troops.

The two Ministers decided to adjourn any decision on this matter to a later date, at any rate until after the result of Sarrail's offensive was known. The impression left on Painlevé's mind was that

the best way to get rid of King Constantine was to create a situation which would make his abdication inevitable, and he resolved to act accordingly.

Some months later I learned that a question of considerable importance, and one that was to affect me personally, was also raised by Painlevé—that of direct liaison between the two War Offices. He suggested the creation of special Military Missions, one in Paris and one in London. He pointed out that at present the two War Offices only corresponded through their respective G.H.Q.'s or through the Foreign Offices. The disadvantage of this system was that liaison through the G.H.Q.'s involved them in questions outside their proper sphere, while liaison through the Foreign Offices laid upon those departments a task for which they were not organized. It was, he said, essential that the two Ministers of War should have means of direct communication through specially selected intermediaries, who would also assume responsibility for the technical liaison between the General Staffs in the two capitals. What was actually happening at the moment, he said, was that British G.H.Q. officers called at the War Office in Paris and collected some facts and much gossip, a good deal of it of a political nature; they were merely the servants and emissaries of the Commander-in-Chief, providers of good stories for the entertainment of the messes through which they flitted. The corresponding French system, said Monsieur Painlevé, suffered from the same disadvantages and worked even less well than the British.

The other and more official means of communication available to the two War Offices through the Foreign Offices was, he asserted, open to even graver objections. There had been serious leakages of information due to this roundabout method. (General Robertson would have wholeheartedly agreed with him about this.) It was ridiculous that the French and British War Ministers and their Staffs, who had such urgent and confidential matters to discuss, should have as their only direct channels of communication the military attachés, who were themselves subordinates of the ambassadors.

Mr. Lloyd George agreed with these arguments, and accepted Monsieur Painlevé's suggestion, which was carried out in the following month, when at a few hours' notice I found myself appointed to Paris as Head of the British Military Mission attached to the French Government

The conversations at 10 Downing Street lasted till 8 p.m. and were resumed next morning, the 10th, when Painlevé met the other members of the British War Cabinet. The discussion was more general than at the *tête-à-tête* of the previous day.

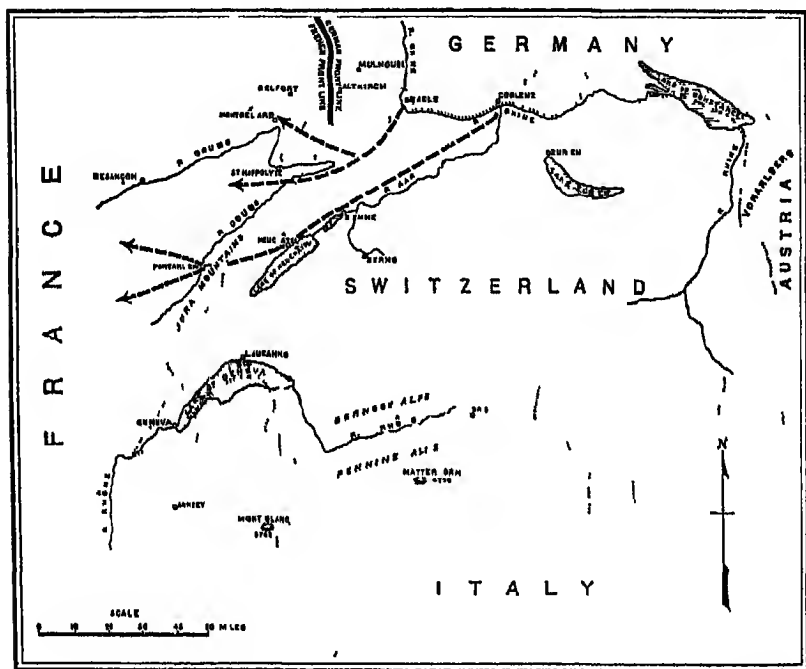
At 3 p.m. Painlevé went to the War Office where he conferred with Lord Derby, then Secretary of State for War, and Sir William Robertson. A good many of the matters discussed on the previous afternoon with the Prime Minister were touched upon, and the Italian problem was gone into more thoroughly.

The first point, heavily underlined by Monsieur Painlevé, was that General Foch had gone to Italy not as the emissary of the G.Q.G. but as the representative of the French Government. He was at pains to make it very clear that the Italian theatre was outside General Nivelle's purview. Having established this point he went on to say that the French Government, unanimously supported by French military opinion, considered it essential that all arrangements should be made to rush Franco-British forces to Italy if that country were attacked. General Robertson concurred, but said that the French and British military authorities must remain the judges as to whether, if the emergency arose, the dispatch of troops in support of the Italians was justified. The number of divisions required and the question of whether they could be spared from the Western Front were, he roundly asserted, matters to be decided by the General Staffs alone. He also said that the recent decision to send French and British Missions to Italian G.H.Q. really solved the difficulty, since the two War Offices could base their decisions on the reports received from them. These views, growled out with considerable emphasis, were prudently not contested by Painlevé. He hastily embarked upon an account of General Foch's impressions of his talk with General Cadorna, which were on the whole reassuring. The Italian Commander-in-Chief had declared himself confident of being able, without Anglo-French support, to hold any attack in the Trentino carried out by the Austrians alone. Should the Germans reinforce the attack he could still, he considered, defend the mountain passes for nearly three weeks, which would allow ample time for Allied reinforcements to arrive. There was no need to send Anglo-French troops now; all that was necessary was to make plans for their transport if the emergency arose.

General Robertson observed that this information reflected a far more confident frame of mind than he had found when, in company

with General Weygand, he had seen General Cadorna at Udine on the 23rd of the previous month.

The possibility of the Germans violating Swiss neutrality was also discussed. This contingency, which has already been referred to, had been looked upon as a very serious one by the French for a considerable time past. General Foch had been designated Commander of the 'Helvetic Army' which, should it ever be constituted, was to comprise three Armies of thirty divisions; he had been studying the problem for some time. The danger was self-evident. Had



the Germans invaded Switzerland they could have threatened either the industrial region of Lyons or the rear of the Italian armies, or indeed both. The French knew that the German plan of invasion was ready down to the minutest details, and in General Foch's opinion it was certainly to the enemy's interest from a military point of view to carry it out. The Swiss authorities agreed with these conclusions, although they believed an invasion of their territory would be a serious political mis-

take on the part of Germany. Still, the danger was such that the Federal authorities had decided to confer with the French on the subject.

Painlevé explained that a few days previously (April 6th-7th) General Weygand and other French officers had had a conference in the utmost secrecy at Berne with Colonel de Sprecher, the Chief of the Swiss General Staff. The interview had been most cordial and a verbal understanding had been reached on the following lines.

The French Army would only march into Switzerland at the request of the Federal Government. This request would not be made unless the German Government delivered an ultimatum to the Swiss Government or concentrated large forces on the German-Swiss frontier. The Swiss Army would operate under the orders of the French Commander-in-Chief. So as to facilitate joint action between the two armies should the German threat materialize, it was arranged that a certain number of Swiss officers, technicians and specialists, should be attached to the French Army, but special care was to be taken that they should remain ignorant of the real object of their stay in France.

General Robertson, who had already been informed of all but the most recent developments, expressed his agreement with these arrangements.

That night, Lord Derby gave a dinner to his French colleague and his officers at Derby House. Members of the Cabinet, Sir William Robertson, General Maurice, Lord Revelstoke and others were also present. Lord Derby was as always a perfect host, the company unusually distinguished, and a subdued atmosphere of excitement and expectancy prevailed, for everyone was discussing the news from Arras. No one dared build too high hopes on the reports of the first success; there had been too many disappointments in the past. Too many victories joyfully acclaimed had dwindled as the days went by, until they finally amounted to gains only perceptible on the largest-scale maps, or closed on the dismal 'as you were' note, with nothing changed on the battlefield save that the ground was more churned up than it had been before, more blasted by the shelling; while at home a few more hundreds or thousands of names were added to the casualty lists, and the post office delivered a corresponding number of those dreaded telegrams beginning 'Regret to inform you . . .', messages which broke the hearts and ruined the hopes of so many families, and left so many women and children



to face the world unprotected and alone. But perhaps this time things would be different. After dinner Lord Derby and the C.I.G.S. were handed dispatches confirming the successes of the previous day and announcing fresh ones. Hope thus suddenly materializing into happy reality caused an outburst of enthusiasm even in that restrained atmosphere. Not since the beginning of the war had such definite news of a great victory been received.

While the chests of the Englishmen swelled with pride, their satisfaction was probably nothing compared with the relief felt by Painlevé. If what was after all only a secondary attack proved such a success, then General Nivelle's main operation must stand an excellent chance. Vimy presented as formidable an obstacle as the heights of the Aisne, and the British advance would inevitably disorganize the enemy's defences. Our troops appeared to be about to burst open his back door, and from the news received there even seemed some prospect of the British cavalry getting through next day.

Next morning, April 11th, Mr. Lloyd George and Monsieur Painlevé, together with the French officers who had accompanied him, and Monsieur de Fleuriau, Councillor to the French Embassy, went to Folkestone to meet the French Prime Minister, Monsieur Ribot, who had left Paris at 6 a.m. The small party stood on the quay as the boat came into sight just before 2 p.m. Ribot's tall figure surmounted by a proportionately tall bowler hat was soon discernible. Presently with flowing locks, flowing beard, flowing bow tie and flapping sleeves, he floated down the gangway. A moment later, Mr. Lloyd George, to his evident surprise, found himself enfolded in those flapper-like sleeves. For an instant it seemed as if Tenniel's walrus had come to life and was hugging a very small and indignant oyster. This fondling hardly lasted long enough for the British Prime Minister to recover his composure, and the subsequent vigorous and repeated handshakes which extended to the whole circle, until everybody was shaking hands with everybody else, gave the impression that this distinguished but bizarre group was about to start singing Auld Lang Syne. This unusual effusiveness, it presently transpired, was to convey the great joy of the French visitors at the news from Arras.

Monsieur Painlevé took his leave, but, anglicized by twenty-four hours in London, kissed nobody. He stepped on board and made

for Dunkirk, whence he went to La Panne next day to see the King of the Belgians. That same night he returned to Paris.

The interview between the two Prime Ministers at Folkestone was remarkable for its length — it lasted from 2 to 5 p.m. — the ease with which it was conducted owing to Monsicur Ribot's fluent command of the English language, and the curious and very secret nature of the discussion.

The subject, known to very few in France even amongst Cabinet Ministers (Painlevé had no inkling of it), was the Austrian peace proposals put forward by the Emperor Karl through his brother-in-law Prince Sixte de Bourbon, who was serving as an officer in the Belgian Army. (The Prince was a Frenchman but, belonging to the Royal House of France, was debarred by law from serving in the army of his own country.)

Preliminary and very tentative negotiations had been going on for some time. They had progressed far enough to convince Monsieur Poincaré and Monsieur Ribot, who had been very sceptical at first, that they were genuine as far as the Emperor Karl was concerned and should be communicated to Mr. Lloyd George forthwith.

The matter was considered by the French to be of considerable importance, for so far Germany alone had put out feelers on the subject of peace, and her motives were obvious enough. Ever since 1914, when she had found her military plans were not developing according to expectations, she had hinted that she would be prepared to consider returning to the *status quo ante*. Disappointed at not having made the anticipated slam, she was quite ready to claim a misdeal, trusting that judicious shuffling would yield a better hand next time.

Ribot explained that Prince Sixte had been to see the Austrian Emperor in great secrecy. That sovereign had expressed himself as very sympathetic to the point of view of the Entente. The Emperor's main concern was to obtain the support of France for his proposals, for in his view she was the largest shareholder on the Allied side. It was his evident desire to treat with the other Allies through her, but this point was not stressed by Ribot. On the other hand, he emphasized the fact that not only did the Emperor agree that Alsace-Lorraine should be returned to France, but that he thought the left bank of the Rhine should be neutralized as well.

He gave Mr. Lloyd George a letter from the French President which summarized the Austrian peace proposals.

1. Austria recognized that Alsace and Lorraine were French provinces and would do all in her power to obtain their restitution to France.

2. Belgium was to be re-established as a full sovereign state under her present King. She was to receive compensation and to keep her African possessions.

3. Serbia was also to be re-established in full sovereignty under the reigning dynasty. Austria would give her access to the Adriatic and allow her to retain the Albanian territories she held at the moment. She would also make large economic concessions to that country.

4. Austria would disinterest herself from Constantinople in exchange for Austro-Hungarian territories held by Russia.

The motives underlying the Emperor's initiative were, Ribot thought, clear enough. He evidently felt humiliated by Germany's overbearing attitude, and was manifestly afraid that if the struggle were prolonged his heterogeneous peoples would become unmanageable and he would lose his throne. Dynastic considerations were obviously his main preoccupation. The Hapsburg, excellent man and conscientious sovereign though he was, could not help placing the safety of his House and his grip on its subject races higher than any other interest. The Austrian Empire had lost many wars but the Hapsburgs had survived. The main duty of the present occupier of the throne was to ensure that the dynasty weathered the present crisis. The French Prime Minister pointed out that the Emperor's gnawing anxiety was revealed by the way he had insisted in his talk with Prince Sixte that the Entente, as part of the bargain, should help to suppress the secret societies that were such a danger to his throne. It was also apparent that he had lively apprehensions lest the Dual Monarchy might provide his powerful ally with the small change of a peace settlement, and the secret Russo-German peace negotiations, of which he was aware, were not calculated to allay his fears on this head.

Ribot stressed the impression he had gathered from the Prince that the Emperor had no illusions concerning Germany. He had told his brother-in-law that the men in power there were determined to obtain a *Sieghriege*, a total victorious peace, but if they persisted in this, if Germany did not accept a fair settlement, he would hold himself free to carry out separate peace negotiations.

Ribot showed Mr. Lloyd George an autograph letter from the Emperor to Prince Sixte, and gave him a copy of it. He insisted on

the vital necessity of secrecy which had been pledged to the Emperor. Mr. Lloyd George gave his word and said he would not inform any of his colleagues and would even hesitate to tell the King.

M. Ribot then went on to say that the Emperor had told Prince Sixte that one of the Allied Powers had entered into secret negotiations with Bulgaria and Turkey, promising the latter Constantinople. In his opinion the Power in question could only be Italy. Mr. Lloyd George was quite prepared to believe this, but thought that if it were so the offer of Smyrna to Italy would have a very calming effect. It would, he believed, also have the further advantage of making her more pliable, more reasonable, on the ticklish question of dethroning King Constantine, an event the British Prime Minister said quite frankly he was anxious to see brought about as soon as possible. He told Ribot, however, as he had told Painlevé, that some members of his Cabinet, notably Mr. Balfour, objected and would have to be treated with great circumspection. In his opinion Baron Sonnino should be seen at once; he thought that not only Smyrna but the Trentino might be offered to Italy.

Monsieur Ribot felt this might be a good plan. In any case as the Emperor had told Prince Sixte that he would not attack on the Italian front while negotiations were in progress, this would at least give the French and English time to feel their way with the Italians as Mr. Lloyd George suggested. One thing was essential; no approach must be made to the Italians without Prince Sixte's consent. Ribot said he would see him immediately on his return to Paris.

As a result of the Folkestone interview, Ribot was considerably more interested in these negotiations than he had been hitherto, but nevertheless, so he told the French President, Mr. Lloyd George's enthusiasm on the subject far surpassed his own.

He hardly thought it would be possible to conclude peace with Austria without quarrelling with Italy, who would not consent to give up the territorial gains she hoped to make at Austria's expense, gains that Austria would never concede unless beaten to her knees.<sup>1</sup>

In fulfilment of his promise Ribot saw Prince Sixte and informed him of his conversation with Mr. Lloyd George, asking his leave to get in touch with Baron Sonnino. The Prince hesitated; he said that if there was the least indiscretion and Germany heard of the Emperor's initiative, his brother-in-law's life would not be worth a

<sup>1</sup> Public peace proposals were also made at this time by Austria to Russia. As these made it plain that Germany and Austria were in agreement, Monsieur Ribot felt additional mistrust concerning the Emperor Karl's intentions.

moment's purchase. It was finally decided that Monsieur Ribot should telegraph to the Italian Foreign Minister, asking him to meet Mr. Lloyd George and himself at St. Jean de Maurienne, to discuss very secret matters of the highest importance. Military questions that had to be settled were to be given as the reasons for the meeting, and Ribot, carefully choosing the moment, was to tell Baron Sonnino that the French and British Governments had reason to believe they would soon receive peace overtures, but that not wishing to be taken unawares, they desired to confer with their Italian colleagues as to what their answer should be. Secrecy was, he would insist, an essential condition to success, and any indiscretion would prevent the offer materializing. Monsieur Ribot promised that the Emperor's name would in no circumstances be mentioned.

Thus, finger on lip, hardly daring to mention the subject in whispers, Prime Ministers, Presidents and Princes met in secret to discuss this fateful matter. Behind locked doors they cogitated. Even trusted colleagues must have no inkling of what was afoot; yet, amazing though it may seem, I, an obscure officer at the front, knew all about it. Casually I noted in my diary under the date of April 12th, in an entry made at Choisy on the Aisne, that I had informed Charteris, head of the Intelligence at G.H.Q., that 'Austria was offering separate peace terms'. This was the day after Mr. Lloyd George, informed by Ribot of the carefully guarded secret, was wondering whether he could pass it on even to the King.

So democracy waged its war against militarism, guarding the door lest the least breath should waft away a secret that meanwhile was fluttering through the window, carried to the front on the strong breeze of gossip. It was only when I was setting my notes in order for this narrative that I realized the full meaning of the entry, to which I had attached little importance at the time.

Soon after Prince Sixte's mysterious visit to Vienna, Count Czernin, the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister, saw General Ludendorff and suggested to him that in view of the entry of the United States into the war there was much to be said for ending it promptly. Would Germany consider ceding Alsace-Lorraine to the French? She could have Poland as compensation, with Galicia thrown in.

The General's answer was unambiguous: the retention of Alsace-Lorraine was a point of honour with Germany; any Government that suggested its surrender would be swept away by a wave of

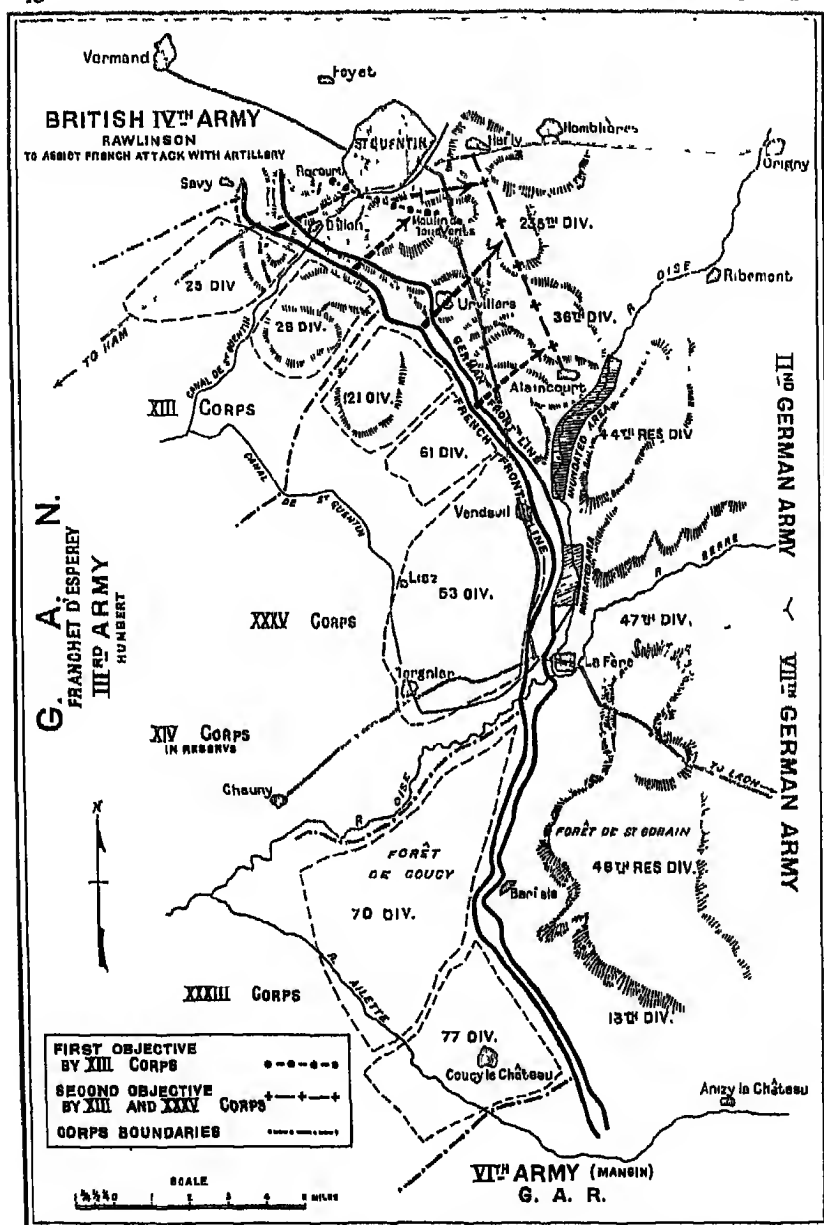
national execration. The Supreme Command itself would not dare to father such a proposal.

The Emperor Karl met with no more success when he made the same suggestion in a personal interview with the Kaiser, and as the only interest his proposals presented to the French was the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine, it is unlikely in any event that his plan would have matured. Germany was too strong for him. Had her rulers got wind of his plans he would have been thrown aside, disgraced, and the reins of government placed in more reliable hands. As it was, the negotiations were wrecked on the rock of Italian intransigence, as Ribot had anticipated they would be.

In great secrecy the French and British Prime Ministers went to St. Jean de Maurienne to confer with Baron Sonnino on April 19th. They were accompanied by several distinguished soldiers, who wondered what on earth they were there for, since they had nothing to do but pace about the dreary little station while Ministers conferred mysteriously. Baron Sonnino's attitude at the meeting so discouraged Monsieur Ribot that, although Mr. Lloyd George would have been willing to continue the negotiations, he decided to bring them to an end.

The luxurious special train which conveyed Ministers back to Paris carries them also out of my narrative. The trains we shall now be watching are old cattle-trucks packed with troops and slowly wending their way towards the Aisne and Champagne, or coming back laden with the mangled remains of men lying on blood-soaked straw. There will be no descriptions of well-appointed meals served in attractive surroundings while the chosen representatives of the people discuss gravely and in very general terms strategy, political tendencies and the personal idiosyncrasies of this statesman or of that. The meals that concern us will be rations carried long distances through rain and snow, consumed in the open by men standing or squatting in the slush; and the conversation will turn on supplies of grenades and rockets, wire-entanglements and whether the bombardment has cut passages through them or not.

Politics will remain in the background, and now that the curtain is about to be rung up to the orchestra of thousands of guns, politicians will become helpless onlookers, unable to alter a line in the drama of which they were part-authors.



PROJECTED OPERATIONS BY THE FRENCH THIRD ARMY (G.A.N.)

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE FRENCH ATTACK ST. QUENTIN

APRIL 13TH

WHILE the tide of the British advance was slowly dying in the Artois plain, its last waves lapping harmlessly against the new German defensive line, the improvised curtain-raiser to the great French attack was being hastily prepared by the Groupe des Armées du Nord.

The attack was to comprise two successive operations. The first was intended to protect the flank of the second and main attack, which aimed at the capture of the high ground south of St. Quentin.<sup>1</sup> If it succeeded, the French would be masters of St. Quentin and in a position to enfilade the German defences which extended southwards along the Oise towards La Fère. They would also be in a position to threaten the hinge of the German system by advancing north of the formidable massif of St. Gobain which Mangin was to tackle from the south.

General Humbert, commanding the Third Army, was in charge of the operation. I used to see him occasionally although he was not easy of access or very forthcoming. A small man, always extremely smart, a military dandy in fact, he liked to launch fashions, and I think it was he who started the mode of wearing a tight-waisted tunic resembling a frock-coat which has since been adopted as the regulation uniform for French generals. He always carried a stick. His angular face gave an impression of harshness, which was accentuated by a brown moustache bristling like that of an angry cat. His eyes were sharp and had that hard quickness characteristic of so many Latins. He was absolute, trenchant, irritable. Although his personality matched his appearance, yet the outward man was more impressive than the real one, as the present difficult circumstances revealed. He had once held a post on the Presidential Staff and had made friends in Paris who, it

<sup>1</sup> The first operation was to be carried out by part of the XIII Corps, which was to capture Rocourt and the Moulin de Tous Vents; and the second, by both the XIII and XXXV Corps, was to be launched against the enemy's position between Harly and Alaincourt.



was said, served him better than did his own military or mental qualities. Colleagues and subordinates both thought that these latter alone were insufficient to account for his successful career.

It is only fair to say that in the present operation he was severely handicapped in many ways. The French could not and would not fire at St. Quentin, which was therefore a haven of refuge to the enemy. From its high cathedral tower and numerous factory chimneys they could watch with impunity all that went on for many miles in every direction. This meant that all attacks had to take place in darkness or at dawn, since otherwise every movement could be seen. The bad weather precluded air observation, there were no air photographs, and counter-battery work was impossible.

The hope that the Hindenburg Line might still be incomplete had been rapidly evaporating. It was true that the enemy was still working at the support line, but the first one was of great strength, and protected by irregular barbed-wire entanglements in some places two hundred yards wide. It ran along the reverse slope of the heights and was therefore invisible from the ground observation posts. Concrete machine-gun emplacements were built well in front of the trenches. The French had already found from experience that even when these were located, which was not an easy matter, they were immune from all but the heaviest howitzer shells. The line was so constructed as to give the maximum scope for flanking fire, and a line of observation ran along the crest of the high ground in front of the whole system. The French front line was between eight and twelve hundred yards from the first German trenches.

The French attack suffered from another disadvantage. As has been seen, General Rawlinson had decided, in view of his own weakness and the increasing enemy resistance, that he would only attack Fayet if the French had previously captured St. Quentin. General Humbert could therefore look only for artillery support on his left flank. On the other hand a British cavalry division was to be held in readiness to penetrate any gap that might be made.

About two hundred and fifty guns participated in the preparation, but it was well known that the support they could give was quite inadequate. It was a foregone conclusion that they could not both deal with the invisible wire and trenches and silence the German batteries.

General Humbert had asked for reinforcements in heavy artillery

but these were not forthcoming. Every available gun was absorbed by the main offensive on the Aisne.

At 5 a.m. on April 13th the XIII Corps attacked. The left division was stopped dead by machine-guns and barbed wire, although a last-minute effort had been made to cut this by the French artillery, whose guns had been hauled out between the lines. The right division was more successful, seizing and holding the German first line in the face of two counter-attacks. The two divisions engaged thirteen battalions, and the losses were severe, one battalion losing a third of its strength.

I visited the various headquarters and saw some of the fighting. There was ample opportunity to observe how command should not be exercised. General Humbert, chilly and obstinate, impervious to the chaos he was creating, sat in the office of the XIII Corps Commander, stick and cap on table, personally issuing orders to the divisions. Under this urge from the rear, which took no account of uncut wire or machine-guns snugly nestling under their concrete roofs, the left division attempted to struggle forward gallantly enough, but only small bodies were able to get through the wire here and there, and it was practically impossible to reinforce them. Nevertheless General Humbert was determined to score a success. In the afternoon he betook himself to the headquarters of this division and there ordered a further attack to take place at 6 p.m., without any reference to the Corps Commander, who was opposed to it. This attack failed to materialize, since the orders did not reach the units in time.

The afternoon was fine and cold. The town of St. Quentin stood out in clear-cut lines like a cardboard city against the pale sky. It was extremely difficult and rather dangerous to move from point to point, as the Germans, watching every movement, concentrated heavy fire even on single individuals.

The French just about held their own in the air till noon, when large German reinforcements came up. Vicious, determined V-shaped flights appeared suddenly, as if conjured up by magic out of the empty sky, and relentlessly chased the French planes back over their own lines.

The French and English artillery were pounding the German lines, having resumed their bombardment in the belief that the attack would be resumed in the evening.

The battlefield appeared strangely unreal, artificial, like a vast

model at an exhibition; in the air small toys turned mechanically this way and that, as if drawn by invisible wires; on the ground specks running about irrationally were dodging invisible and hardly audible machine-guns or taking cover in indiscernible folds of the ground, while cotton-wool clouds appeared over the sky-line above the German trenches. There was little noise owing to the strong wind.

At regimental headquarters, officers shrugged their shoulders and looked gloomy. Everyone knew that the attack had never had a chance of success.

At the end of the day the left division, much shaken, was back in its assault trenches. The one on the right fared scarcely any better. As a result of much hard fighting it held only a hundred yards of the enemy's front line, although battalion commanders thought this was not very strongly held, and the German artillery reaction had not been heavy. The enemy was obviously relying almost exclusively on machine-guns for the defence, and on quick counter-attacks to recover lost ground.

One thing was satisfactory from my point of view. Everyone from the divisional commander downwards was very pleased with the support given by the British artillery, and I was asked to convey to General Rawlinson the deep appreciation of the French.

The failure of the attack damped the ardour of all but General Humbert, who was still determined to have some success to his credit. That evening he ordered the XXXV Corps to attack next day, as it was to have done if the XIII had been successful; but wiser counsels prevailed, for air reports, available at last, showed the German positions to be intact, and the operation was countermanded.

General Humbert again asked for reinforcements in heavy artillery if he was to continue his preparations, and also for further supplies of munitions: but no guns could be spared, and General d'Esperey decided that until these were forthcoming nothing further should be done beyond strengthening the captured positions and digging assault-trenches.

There is ample evidence that General Nivelle and his personal advisers were completely taken aback when they found that General Humbert had met with serious opposition and had not seized St. Quentin. So sure were they of success that at 6 a.m. on the morning of the attack a member of the Commander-in-Chief's personal

Staff rang up the Ministry of War to say the town would be occupied that afternoon at 3 p.m.; but the days of Verdun, when the capture of a fort could be announced with the certainty of the arrival of a train at its destination, were passed.

Incredible though it may seem, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, in spite of daily reports of accumulating German divisions and of new battery-positions incrusting the Aisne heights, the pundits at Compiègne still believed in a German withdrawal and were full of apprehension lest it should rob the French offensive of its fruits; and woe betide anyone who dared express doubts or even draw attention to the real state of affairs. General de Fonclare, commanding the I Corps, was relieved of his command for saying he was not certain of breaking through on the front allotted to him. A similar fate was meted out for the same reason to General Claret de la Touche, while General Fetter, commanding the artillery of the I Corps, received official censure for voicing doubts concerning the efficiency of the bombardment.

Thus confidence, which bubbled up so naturally amongst the troops, was of a more artificial nature amongst certain sections of the Staff. The mental attitude of some officers I knew could in fact have been compared with the strictly limited optimism that might prevail amongst the passengers of a car hurtling out of control down a hill, with a cart already visible drawn across the way: the brakes have been applied and only produce sparks; the most sanguine expectation is confined to a hope that the weight and impetus of the machine will suffice to crash through the obstacle ahead into the safety of the clear road beyond.

On the 14th, the day after the XIII Corps attack, General Nivelle told the Chief of Staff of the G.A.N. that the failure of the attack on St. Quentin did not affect his plans, for he only intended making a big effort between St. Quentin and the Oise when the G.A.R. had reached the Serre, which would be about the 18th or 19th. The attack was in any case to take place only after the tractor-drawn artillery from the G.A.R. arrived, having done its work on the Aisne. The calculation I made at the time was that this could not possibly leave the G.A.R. till the 18th, would arrive, provided roads were available, on the 19th or 20th, and could not begin to register until the 20th or 21st. I therefore concluded that no attack depending upon this artillery could take place before the 23rd or

24th. General Nivelle was more optimistic, for on the 14th he sent a telegram to General d'Esperey.

Express my satisfaction to the troops who carried out yesterday the brilliant reconnaissance of the St. Quentin positions. Their work was both fruitful and useful. You know that the attack of the G.A.R. has been postponed till the 16th. In consequence the deployment on the Serre cannot take place until the 18th or 19th . . . You have therefore until the 19th or 20th before attacking the Hindenburg Line. . . .

It was also decided that when General Mangin's Sixth Army reached the level of La Fère, it should come under the orders of the G.A.N.

Meanwhile I was watching events closely for fear that some new intervention should result in either a postponement or a cancellation of the main French attack. As the representative of our army, with a picture in my mind of our people floundering in the Artois mud, it was my duty, in so far as I was able, to urge the necessity for the French to attack as soon as possible, and to point out how prejudicial to us this long postponement had already been; but as I went about the French front and discussed the attack with gunners and infantry and saw how much remained to be done, I longed desperately for more time. Everywhere officers I met told the same tale; the weather, always the abominable weather, was the fiendish, relentless ally of the Germans. An experienced Group Commander said to me during one of my expeditions to the Aisne front: 'Have you observed that the experience of this war is that the factor bad weather always tells against the assailant?'

It was all too obvious that compared with our Arras front the railway communications were poor, in fact an old friend of mine in this special service declared them to be totally inadequate, as indeed they proved to be. There was only one railway line, the pre-war one which ran from Reims to Braisne, parallel to the front. Many branch-lines and sidings had been improved, but work on them was far from complete, and the same applied to the light railways which in addition lacked their full equipment.

The weather delayed the construction of roads and was responsible for endless delays in the transport. The sodden earth clogged every wheel that left the tracks, the wet told on the health of the men, the bad visibility prevented air observation, which had only been possible for twenty-three hours during the fourteen days preceding the

attack; and even this short time had been largely wasted, owing to the lack of trained observers. They did their best under extremely trying circumstances. It was reported officially that on the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th it was beyond the power of human endurance to keep in the air for more than two or two and a half hours. But bad weather was not the only reason why the French found it so difficult to obtain air observation; the fact was they were far from having mastered the enemy in the air; as soon as there was a clear interval the sky swarmed with very aggressive German planes, which generally chased the French machines back well beyond their own lines. All commanders were unanimous on this point. 'Artillery observation work during the first days of the preliminary bombardment has been rendered extremely difficult owing to the undoubted inferiority of our fighting machines', wrote the Commander of the Fifth Army. The I Corps reported the German aviators to be 'absolutely insolently active', the VI Corps that 'the barrage our fighters are supposed to provide is completely illusory', and a report from the XX Corps stated: 'We certainly do not possess that mastery of the air we undoubtedly had on the Somme from the very beginning of the battle'.

A general attack on enemy observation balloons was ordered by General Nivelle but failed completely owing to the excellent defensive measures of the Germans, and the French losses were such that it was decided not to renew the attempt. It was learnt much later that the main reason for the German superiority in the air was that they had increased the number of their fighting planes on the Western Front from 144 (in July 1916) to 530 (in April 1917) and had ceaselessly striven to improve their machines.

On paper, the Fifth and Sixth Armies had between them some five hundred planes for observation and so on, in addition to thirty-nine balloons, but General Micheler complained on the 7th that, although he had been promised thirteen squadrons of fighters, four of these had not yet arrived, and half the machines he had were unfit to take the air.

The obvious German superiority in the air would in ordinary circumstances have had a deplorable effect on the morale of the troops, but the infantry were persuaded that the Command had enormous air reserves available and was carefully holding them back to deceive the enemy. This was unfortunately far from being the case, as the generals about to attack knew only too well.

Grunners in the batteries looked glum and the artillery staffs were obviously anxious. In 1916 their task had been to destroy one enemy position, sometimes two, simultaneously; now, with practically no ground observation, they had to deal with three and sometimes four carefully concealed positions on reverse slopes, and the first two of these comprised a maze of from three to five lines. Furthermore, the third and fourth positions, which it was necessary to pulverize if General Nivelle's plan was not to miscarry, were out of range of the field guns and only within extreme range of the heavies; it had therefore been found necessary to bring them forward to within effective artillery range of the enemy's field batteries. Not only had this meant bringing up ammunition and establishing dumps under very difficult and dangerous conditions, since the light railway did not reach nearly as far forward as was desirable, but it had also proved costly in material. In one Corps alone, the VI, twenty-seven out of a hundred 155 mm. howitzers were knocked out before the attack, with the result that only 75,000 shells, instead of 110,000, were fired by these guns. Nevertheless the expenditure in ammunition was very great. From the 5th to the 16th April the Fifth and Sixth Armies fired no less than 5,292,000 shells.

It was perhaps not to be wondered at, in these circumstances of difficult if not impossible observation, that little was known of the effect of the shelling on the third German position. Not much more information was available concerning the second. The long-range guns were firing under the direction of balloons which could not possibly observe shells falling between ten and fifteen miles away. Here again, as on the G.A.N. front, there was a great dearth of air photographs. One corps I knew possessed only one showing the second position, and that taken obliquely from a great distance. Another corps only received photographs of this position late in the morning of the day before the attack, and they showed the destruction and wire-cutting to be far from complete. All the available guns were turned on to it, but this blind last-minute effort could not make up for all those lost days.

Compared with so many causes for anxiety, all tending to jeopardize the success of the French attack, the reports from the corps that many of the junior heavy artillery officers were very inexperienced and did not know how to handle their guns, especially the newer types, were a minor matter; much more serious was the dilution of the bombardment, the inevitable result of the postponement necessitated by the weather.

The orders originally issued to the artillery were that the batteries were to carry out discreet registration from April 2nd to 4th, counter-battery work on the 5th and 6th, and *tirs de destruction* from the 7th to the 11th. But already on the 5th the corps artillery commanders reported that in three days they had only been able to carry out the equivalent of an ordinary day's bombardment. It was because of this report that the offensive was postponed until the 14th, then for a similar reason until the 16th. The result was that the long-range heavy guns and the counter-batteries, which had munitions for seven days' fire, were compelled to spread their preparation over a period of fourteen days, and the heavy howitzers which were to have fired their allotment of shells in five days did so in seven. Obviously in these circumstances the enemy must have had many opportunities of repairing whatever damage had been done.

It had been intended to carry out a series of sudden violent bombardments to induce the Germans to believe that the attack was about to be launched. The Fifth Army finally gave up these attempts so as to economize munitions, but the Sixth carried out such a bombardment at 10 a.m. on the 15th, to which the Germans retaliated but weakly. This caused great jubilation and even the blackest pessimists smiled. The optimists declared that evidently, in spite of every handicap, the concentration of French guns was such that they had muzzled those of the enemy.

Occurrences such as these cheered the gunners, but nothing in the information accumulating on their tables tended to mitigate the anxiety of those Intelligence officers with whom I was in contact: the German guns might be silent, but the number of enemy batteries, many of them heavies, had increased a hundred per cent. The density of German troops on the Sixth Army front east of Vailly had grown in about the same proportion.

On the Fifth Army front the story was the same; on February 15th the Germans had 53 batteries, by April 6th there were 181 in position, and on the 12th 392. The number of hostile divisions had increased from four to nine, while twelve, perhaps fifteen divisions were in readiness to intervene immediately.<sup>1</sup> It was of course the right thing to say, especially within hearing of the G.Q.G. liaison

<sup>1</sup> There were on the whole front (from Suippes to Allemant, near Vauxaillon) twenty-one German divisions in the first and second positions, each with part in one, part in the other. There were ten support (Abwehr) divisions behind these, seven in reserve and three *airivins*. The total was thus forty-one, nearly as many as the French could muster.



officers, that in many ways such an accumulation of strength was a good thing. Would not the contrary have been disastrous? What could have been worse than that the French attack should fall into a void once more? But it was not difficult to detect behind all these words a shrill sound as of a whistle, the kind of whistle used to keep one's courage up. I can well remember resorting to the same device on many occasions during those days.

What General Nivelle thought during the days immediately preceeding the attack I do not know, but on one point at least he must have been reassured; he can no longer have feared that the Germans would decamp at the last hour.

There was nothing artificial in the high hopes of both the troops and the public. To the whole nation it seemed as if the hour of deliverance was at hand; the iron grip Germany had maintained for so long on the vitals of the country appeared to be relaxing. The public, having sedulously absorbed the reports of the G.Q.G., were convinced that the German withdrawal in March could only mean that the enemy's morale was evaporating, their strength diminishing. They had heard of General Nivelle's orders, breathing Napoleonic energy and scintillating with Napoleonic aphorisms. They believed the Germans had been hotly pursued to the Hindenburg Line by cavalry, their swords in the small of the enemies' backs, and were totally ignorant of how the infantry had laboured painfully forward in a desert of destruction, unable to gain contact with the retreating enemy.

The German wireless announcements that their retreat had been carried out according to plan, a statement which was only too true, made café strategists laugh till they cried at the ineptitude of a people capable of believing and expecting others to believe such blundering mendacity. One strong blow delivered with the total strength of the nation at an enemy driven back to an incomplete line of defence, and the soil of France would be free.

The terrible discouragement, the fathomless lassitude of the troops had disappeared. A spark of the spirit of the Marne had been re-kindled. The word had gone round 'We will advance stick in hand', *la canne à la main*, and the thought of the walk-over so confidently anticipated cheered the men. Fatalistic and child-minded as soldiers in the mass always are, their eagerness for the great adventure cast a veil over the picture of bullet-swept zones that in other

circumstances would have obsessed them. Soldiers, like the civilians, felt that the chain with which France had been manacled so long was about to be broken by this last great irresistible tug at its Promethean links. A new vigour born of hope stimulated the infantryman stupefied by the endless war. The sullen exasperation caused by so much accumulated misery vanished in the light of a great expectation. The sufferings of the moment were hardly noticed. Even the envious and disdainful hatred against those who, as a French soldier put it to me, 'paid with their honour for the privilege of sleeping between sheets' was forgotten, for every right-minded man would have given ten years of his life to be present on the day of victory. An infantryman I spoke to a few days before the attack put his feeling to me in another way. 'The thought that we are going to drive the Boche out of the country would make the dying walk', he said, and I have no doubt from many other signs and conversations that he really reflected the spirit of that enormous course of men.

The 1917 class, reputed to be very inferior, was now permeated with the new spirit and could almost be counted the equal of its predecessors. Even the men recovered from the back areas, the lightly wounded who had managed to be overlooked and forgotten, bolted *embusqués*, ferretted out and driven to the front, could be relied upon as good soldiers. Men were actually refusing to go on leave for fear of missing the attack.

The war had long since become a struggle between the naked wills of the nations, and the French spirit was now high, vivified by a new hope. The army, at one with the nation, felt itself worthy of the trust placed in it. The men of France had always proved capable of defending the soil of France. This generation would not prove unworthy. The French troops had faith in themselves, faith in Nivelle, faith in Mangin. They were enormously encouraged by the visible signs of the gigantic effort the whole army was about to make. Amongst the troops moving up to the battle zone, who could see great guns in every fold of the ground and other troops swarming along every road, a real sense of exhilaration prevailed. The fact that fresh divisions were pouring into the back areas, announced by the strange 'rumour news' that travelled so fast at the front, gave confidence also. It was as if General Nivelle's *mot*, 'What are the risks when one attacks with fifty divisions?', had been heard by all.

It seemed to me that the confidence of Mangin's Army was particularly marked and its morale specially high. Such was the personality of its Commander that it had impressed itself upon all ranks, and the regiments under his orders, believing that they had been 'specially chosen by Mangin', felt real pride at this imaginary distinction and were animated by an ardent desire to justify it.

The type of humour had changed; during the winter it had often been sinister. I had myself heard troops coming down from the trenches calling to the relieving columns as they passed, 'There go the reinforcements for the cemetery', 'There's a shortage of coffins up there', and such-like jokes. Now in spite of the weather, depressing beyond all description, a wave of cheerfulness, refreshing as a breeze off the sea at the flow of the tide, had swept over the army. Small witticisms, as in the days when the army and the war were both young, caused the troops to roar with laughter.

The imagination of humorists must have been stimulated, for I remember there was a whole crop of new stories, some of which I noted, as for instance that of the two Marsillais on leave boasting to an admiring audience of their achievements. The one had, according to his story, been the real cause of von Kluck's turning tail on the Marne, the other's marvellous handling of his machine-gun and the thousands of casualties it had inflicted, as all in his division knew, were the undoubted reason of the Kaiser's defeat in Flanders. When they had both run through all metaphors and exhausted imagination they turned to a third soldier who had listened saying nothing. 'And you', they inquired, 'have you done nothing during the war?' 'Oh', he said, 'I am out of this, you see I was killed at Verdun'.

The French soldier, like all other soldiers, when with comrades he has grown used to, and provided he is fed and lodged not less well than an average pig, sheds the austerity of manhood and recovers much of the light-heartedness of youth. An example of this simple-mindedness, touching because it amused so many who never survived that spring, was the joke current in one battalion concerning a stout, enormously bearded private who was pointed out to me by one of his officers. It seemed that this fellow had once had a great adventure, dominating all his war experiences, of which he constantly boasted to his comrades; he would recount it whenever asked, which happened frequently, especially at meal times.

Arms waving and mouth full, he would tell how he had once met a general as he came down from the line. 'Where do you come from?'

the general had said. 'From the battle, *mon Général*', he had answered. 'Splendid', the general had said, 'splendid' — and that was all there was to it, but whenever this individual appeared where men were gathered together washing or cooking, someone would shout: 'Where do you come from, gallant warrior?' Someone else would yell out a suggestion of any one of his possible activities, from stealing the quartermaster-sergeant's rum downwards; then all present, adopting the tone of voice privates imagine to be characteristic of generals, would chant in chorus: *C'est magnifique, mais c'est magnifique*.

The troops all expected to bivouac miles behind the German lines on the first day of the attack and to be relieved within forty-eight hours. They were in fact aware of the approximate line the Higher Command had laid down for their corps to reach, and this knowledge, sedulously fostered by the regimental officers, gave reality and purpose to their hopes.

Only two cogs in the French fighting machine seemed unaffected by the prevailing enthusiasm, and carried on with the quiet resignation that had always characterized them. One was the old Territorials who mended roads and carried heavy burdens up to the front lines. There was something splendid and pathetic about these elderly men, to whom none of the glory and excitement of battle fell, hewers of wood and drawers of water for the army, housemaids of the battlefield, bearers of burdens to places no animal could reach, who carried on uncomplaining while the sons of many of them filled the line regiments.

Such a one I met in the battle zone about this time, and for some reason I do not understand he has remained in my mind more vividly than all the thousands I saw or the scores I spoke to. He was struggling back across very heavy ground, and his rifle was too heavy for him. I took it from him and we journeyed together helping each other across disused trenches. His face was thin and drawn with fatigue, his hair almost white, his back bent, his thin legs weak. He was a baker, he told me, from somewhere in central France, and between sobbing breaths of exhaustion he told me of his grandchildren, wondered how they were; they were growing up now; his two sons had been killed.

The other class, unmoved and uninspired by General Nivelle's plan, were also creatures who carried burdens, tiny donkeys who, in endless caravans, their dainty hoofs sinking deep into the mud, bore their

heavy loads up to the forward areas. With flapping ears and sorrowful eyes, their coats matted, they laboured through the hell of the man-made war, uncomprehending as if they had been mere soldiers. They knew nothing of the new hope, and may have gone on wondering, as the army had so long wondered, what they had done to deserve eternal punishment.

It may be that yet another element of the French Army should be classified amongst those who failed to appreciate to the full the splendour and magnitude of General Nivelle's conception — the black troops. Gallant fighters though they were, it is doubtful whether they understood what it was all about.

I had seen for myself that the continued bad weather was having a most deleterious effect on them. These creatures, who could look so formidable in warm weather, whose ugliness had something so disquieting, mysterious unfathomable sub-human warriors, magnificent only when, bathing and naked, their superb bodies were revealed, now looked like pathetic piccaninnies abandoned in a northern blizzard.

The questions I put concerning them were lightly brushed aside. It was admitted that the cold spell had temporarily depressed them, but it would do them no harm for, having wintered in the south, they were fit and strong and their vitality high.

There were rumours that the two Russian brigades which were to take part in the attack were so contaminated by revolutionary ideas that there was a possibility of their not fighting at all.

In some ways I sympathized with these strangers. They were very far from home, and the unsentimental French used them, and used them hard. There were lots of Russians in the world and few French, thought the logical Gaul; but there was little consolation in this reflection if you happened to be Muscovites and felt you would be kept in the forefront of every battle until there were none of you left. It was said, and I found out later it was true, that they balloted to decide whether they would fight or not and finally voted to do so. Their choice once made they did not look back and, on the present occasion at least, fought well.

On one point the French organization was obviously and scandalously at fault: the medical arrangements. I was used to their breaking down, but on other occasions there had been some excuse. During the great retreat of 1914 it was a commonplace to meet, just ahead of the marching columns, long processions of wounded drag-

ging themselves along the roads where many died, exhausted and unattended. Springless farm-carts with blood-stained straw on which lay men often desperately wounded, drawn by horses or oxen, jolted down uneven dusty roads; and long trains of cattle-trucks were drawn up on the railway tracks, loaded with wounded and dying, with no orderlies, doctors, or nurses, no one even to give the men a drink of water; the engine-drivers often did not know their destination. But that had been the invasion, when under merciless pressure all arrangements had broken down and the supreme duty of the staff had been to see to the fighting men.

Now things were different and there was no excuse for the terrible inefficiency of the medical services.

The French practice, perhaps a sound one from the surgical point of view, was to place great evacuation hospitals very near the front. This had the advantage of enabling major operations to be carried out without delay but was hard on the wounded. They remained in the fire zone, a singularly unpleasant and nerve-racking experience, as any one who has ever been through it well knows. Under heavy shelling the wounded man's nerves sometimes give way; feeling utterly defenceless, he is not always capable of mustering the courage to lie stoically on bed or stretcher amidst bursting shells; it is then that men have been known to cry and wring their hands, while sweat pours off the grey and drawn faces of those who cannot move.

The hospital sites had been unfortunately chosen, near munition and petrol dumps and, worse still, near artillery positions, so that the enemy had an excuse for shelling them. On one occasion a heavy gun on a railway siding was actually run into the siding intended to serve the hospital at Mont-Notre-Dame, with the result that within a few minutes hospital-huts were flying in splinters in every direction, torn to pieces by the German counter-batteries.

What actually occurred at that hospital, scheduled to receive four thousand wounded, I well knew. Thanks to the arrival of two truck-loads of equipment from a hospital in Flanders, there were at least sterilization drums available, but here as elsewhere there were no lint, bandages or disinfectants and very few surgical instruments; only one saw for four operating theatres, for instance. Kitchens were nowhere installed, and there was a shortage of doctors, surgeons, stretcher-bearers; in fact there was not enough of anything, not enough beds and bedding, not enough dressings or drugs. At

Prouilly Hospital there were four thermometers for a Hospital of three thousand five hundred beds.

This terrible muddle was largely due to lack of liaison between the Staff, the Medical service and the Transport section. This was no new thing. When the G.Q.G. arrived at Compiègne, a hospital installed in the Château had been ordered to move instantly with no warning, to make room for offices. No alternative building was available, but the order had to be obeyed, with the result that wounded men, including some who had been trepanned that day, were taken out and left to lie on stretchers in the open for many hours in very inclement weather. The same thing had happened at Noyon where, when the town was reoccupied, the Staff decided to take over a building which the Germans had used as a hospital and in which many French wounded were found.

These things were very depressing, hardened though one had become to suffering, but at the time, when every fibre was concentrated on the offensive, I gave them little thought; they loom larger in my memory than they did in my consciousness then. My duty at that particular time was to assess the likelihood of victory, to gauge the weakness or excellence of the arrangements made, so that our army might profit from French experience and practice. I had to be ready to provide my chiefs with the material to judge whether, should the attack only attain some of its objectives, it could reasonably be expected to lead to success at a later stage if persisted in.

I remember well some of the reconnaissances this search for information entailed. Oddly enough, even some minor impressions I had at that time have not faded: for instance I can recall standing in the desolate town of Soissons. The air stank with the bitter-sweet smell of gas, at intervals an enormous shell fell somewhere in the town, the streets were a shambles. I remember thinking the place could not have looked very different after it had been sacked by the Franks, and this thought recalled a story of how Clovis, their King, had wished to possess a gold vase, loot from the cathedral. It had, so the tale goes, fallen by lot to one of his soldiers who refused to give it up to him. Years later, reviewing his troops at Reims, Clovis came upon this same soldier and struck his shield down, then as the man stooped to pick it up, split his skull with his battle-axe, saying, 'Remember the vase of Soissons'. He was the first Christian King of France, I believe. Many times during the war I had occasion to remember

the sinister sentence, the unforgiving hatred of the words. '*Souviens-toi du vase de Soissons!*'

A letter I wrote at about this time to a friend at G.H.Q., well placed to submit it to the highest authority, may not be without interest. Its purpose was to emphasize again an idea I had tentatively put forward earlier. It had struck me that if the French failed to pierce the German lines, as I feared might be the case, the immense accumulation of troops for the break-through would be wasted; worse still, enthusiasm would evaporate with lack of success, and the revulsion of feeling would be serious. Why not be prepared in case of failure to transfer General Fayolle's First Army, so recently arrived from the G.A.N., up north to the British front? I argued that this Army would be entirely useless if the fighting did not develop in such a way as to make its employment on the Aisne possible within a couple of days, unless the French resigned themselves to a long-drawn-out battle, which we were assured was the last thing they wanted. Our army on the other hand had made a considerable advance. The defences to which the enemy had been driven on Allenby's and Horne's fronts were trifling compared with those facing the French, the terrain was infinitely more favourable; all that was necessary was large reinforcements, and these were not available.<sup>1</sup>

The plan seemed to me the more feasible because the Intelligence anticipated that on the day following the attack the Germans would be compelled, under pressure of the assault, to concentrate on the Aisne practically all their reserves, including those drawn from the Russian theatre. Many of these would either be engaged or needed to carry out essential reliefs of badly hammered divisions. They would have great difficulty in meeting a large mass of French troops rapidly moved to our front. The recent transfer of so many units from the G.A.N. front proved that the reverse operation could be carried out in a very short time. It was obvious, I said, that however often we might break the German line, and we had proved we could do this, we should never progress unless we had a mass of fresh troops in readiness to exploit the success immediately, and these troops the British Army had not got.

One of the advantages of the scheme was that the First Army was commanded by General Fayolle, assisted by Colonel Duval. They were loved by our people and had proved themselves to be the most loyal of comrades during the long and trying days of the Somme.

<sup>1</sup> See Map facing page 560.



I had taken the precaution of fastening the paternity of the idea upon General d'Espercy. When I had submitted it to him he had been enthusiastic. Not only had he accepted it, but he had had a memorandum drawn up, laying down the method by which it could best be carried out, in readiness to submit to General Nivelle without loss of time should the case arise. This was an adequate alibi. Should the plan mature it would be his; in any case it stood a chance of being considered, which would certainly not have happened had it been traced back to a mere liaison officer. In the army it is not good for either the materialization of ideas or the well-being of their authors that they should be attributed to junior officers, who, as every one knows, exist for the purpose of obeying orders, not of developing notions of their own.

The response G.H.Q. gave to the idea when it reached them in official form from the French was short and direct. 'Relieve part of our line, then we will carry out the attack ourselves.'

This was of course equivalent to turning the plan down. The French would never have consented; it would have meant reviving, at the worst possible moment, the old controversy about the length of the lines, and the delay would have been such that no surprise would have been possible. The only satisfaction I obtained was an admission that though difficult it would not be at all impossible to engage a French Army between two British ones.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE EVE OF THE AISNE<sup>1</sup>

APRIL 15TH

ON the day before the great offensive, the 15th, I went to see General Mangin. The little man, whose square head was surmounted by a stiff doormat crop of black hair, had changed a good deal. I looked at him keenly. The strong jaw seemed to protrude with greater determination than ever from between his leathery, hanging cheeks, and the deepset light eyes had a steelier look than when I had last seen him. He had grown in importance and dignity. There was something formidable about him, a concentrated determination emphasized by the straight heavy eyebrows that stamped a thick black line across his face above the shorter one of his bristling black moustache. His high-pitched voice had gained incisiveness, his movements were slower.

It was a horrible day: although the morning had been fine it was pouring now, but as he stood on the threshold of his headquarters he did not appear to notice or to care. He was gazing away and beyond, and I felt he was seeing his Army advancing across the Laon plain, miles beyond the forbidding hills that lay between him and his objectives.

I had often met him before, I was often to meet him again, but that afternoon I saw a man who had little in common with the Mangin I had known in earlier days, or with the amicable post-war friend who smiled a vast smile with a large, perfectly straight mouth.

I was so impressed, not only by his personality but also by his terrible responsibility, that I felt a timidity or diffidence I had never before experienced when talking to him. There was much I wished to know, especially concerning the second German position, but he brushed my questions aside almost roughly, and asked me if I realized the weight of the tank attack which would flatten out anything the guns had left standing. One question in particular I had been ordered by the Operations section of G.H.Q. to ask him. It concerned the front of attack of his divisions. He had eleven divisions

<sup>1</sup> For this chapter, see Map facing page 514.

on the Aisne for a front of thirteen kilometres. Six were in front line, so that each attacking division had a front of more than two kilometres. This was far longer than the average front allotted to our attacking divisions at Arras and appeared excessive; but I can find no trace of his answer nor can I remember what it was.

Although his words are lost to me, the sound of Mangin's voice, high-pitched, clear and metallic, lingers in my memory and is as easy to evoke as the picture of the man himself. A small, dark, fierce figure, he stood against a background of enormous Senegalese orderlies, whose expressionless brown or jet-black faces might have been stamped out of shoe-leather in which rolled coffee-streaked eyeballs and eyes as mysterious as a pool in an African forest. I think of him that day as the embodiment of the soul of war; iron, unflinching resolution, confidence that knows no doubts.

Confidence was needed, for the news was not good. A German raid had captured thirteen men that morning, a bad thing on the eve of an attack, as the enemy would certainly glean some information from the prisoners. A feint attack carried out in the morning had drawn the German barrage, which came down on its own first line trenches, showing clearly that the enemy had abandoned them.

From General Mangin's headquarters I proceeded eastwards, from observation point to observation point, stopping at this advanced headquarters and at that. Officers I met and knew well echoed grimly the criticisms I had already heard concerning the French fighting aircraft; they had entirely failed to protect the observation machines. Several gunners said that they were certain the first German position was destroyed, but that the second was, as far as could be observed, untouched. This reconnaissance left a deep impression on my mind, for not only was I extremely strung up by the idea of the forthcoming attack, but it so happened that I found myself several times at points I had often visited in 1914 when the B.E.F. was on the Aisne. In the autumn of that year, which seemed so far away as to belong to another existence, an occasional battery was to be found hidden in a fold of the ground. Now rows of guns, wheel to wheel in every gully, were belching forth with ear-splitting noise shoals of shells across the valley. Death rode those shells, death now man's slave, sent to gather obediently a harvest of lives on the slopes over there, and the screech of the missiles tearing the air made one feel that all the demons of hell must be rushing in mad pursuit of the flying shells,

howling and whining for fear they would not be there in time to pounce on the souls about to be torn from mangled bodies.

When my guide and I stopped I unfolded my map, which showed the lines of the advance. To the left arose, guessed rather than seen through the mist and rain, the immense wooded massif of St. Gobain, prolonged to the south by the equally forbidding forests of Pinon and Mortier, country many of us well remembered since it played an important part in the great retreat of 1914, impossible to fight in, capable of absorbing and losing divisions and even whole corps in its league-wide thickets. These enormous forests stretched for miles and were impenetrable to troops save along the roads. They reminded me of our own New Forest, developed by William of Normandy for no other purpose than to form an impassable screen along the dangerous stretch of coast he was not strong enough to garrison, and along whose length he could not build castles.

Now, if things went well, the same ground would be crossed once again. The Colonials on the left had the formidable task of scaling those steep wooded slopes opposite, so as to turn the enemy lines facing the Aisne. Abrupt wooded hills and deep ravines succeeded each other, culminating in the great spur of Chivres surmounted by the famous fort of Condé, projecting like the prow of a huge ship into the French lines.

The slopes north of the Aisne rose steep and stark: Vailly, Soupir, Moussy, these had been villages in our time, now they were heaps of stones. Farther east, Pontavert, whence General de Maud'huy had watched his corps attacking towards la Ville-aux-Bois, was, I gathered, as dangerous as ever. Craonne, in the German lines, was not distinguishable as a locality even through strong field-glasses. It had been wiped out. The villages and hamlets whose ruins sprawled on the sides of the slopes facing us had, we knew, been built on chalk, and each house possessed one of the curious caves already referred to, the *creutes*. The Intelligence were well aware that the enemy was making full use of these, and most of the southern exits had been located by the artillery, but none of those leading to the plateau had been identified.

From prisoners it had been gathered that the enemy had done a lot of work in these *creutes*, but none grasped that they had made shelters no artillery could damage, so deep that they were reached by stairs with from a hundred to a hundred and twenty steps, so complete and well planned that they resembled the corridors of a

modern hotel, leading to innumerable apartments brilliantly lit by electricity, so extensive that they gave access in some cases to the valleys behind.

These details we did not know, but the Intelligence had taken enormous pains to find out about these *creules*. They had sent special officers to Annemasse, the great examining centre on the Swiss frontier, to question refugees coming through from this region, and had interrogated mayors and gamekeepers who knew the neighbourhood. The data thus collected had been carefully collated and plans drawn up.

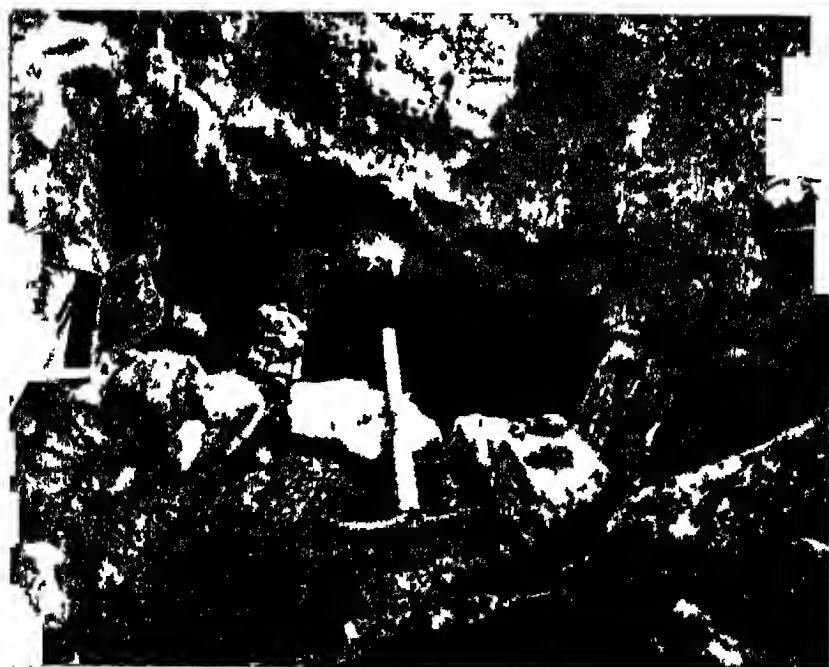
It is a sad commentary on the mentality governing the G.Q.G. that this information was disregarded. Had it been heeded it could only have confirmed in any unbiased mind the conviction that no commander who was not a craven or a lunatic would abandon positions of such strength, and whatever might be thought of the German generals they were neither.

The map showed that facing the main French attack northwards lay three lines of parallel plateaux running from west to east. Both the river and the canal were serious military obstacles, difficult to negotiate where they ran in the enemy's lines, and forming dangerous defiles where they ran behind the French lines. The river was of an average depth of eight feet, and 164 feet wide; the canal was forty-five feet wide and six feet deep.

The first of the tremendous obstacles the French had to overcome was the long ridge surmounted by a narrow bare plateau along which ran the famous way known as the Chemin des Dames. This ridge was a massif deeply indented by ravines whose slopes were covered by woods with thick undergrowth, or by vineyards; it was impassable to artillery save by the roads. Some of the escarpments were so steep that even infantry could hardly climb them.

The ground beyond the Chemin des Dames ridge was even more difficult than that we could see, so the Intelligence notes I had with me revealed. The river-valleys of the Ailette and the Bièvre were bogs extending as far as the Forest of Vauclerc. Farther east the Miette and Loivre streams were very swampy at all times. My map showed the German defensive system. It was enormously deep, extending from eight to ten kilometres behind the front, but of all these trenches the first, the line of observation, was alone clearly visible, or at least its position was, for it was enveloped in the smoke of the French bombardment. The second line, or line of resistance, which





(top) FRENCH INFANTRY IN A CAPTURED GERMAN TRENCH  
(bottom) ENTRANCE TO A CREUTE

ran along the foot of the hills, could not be seen easily from most points, but was also being heavily shelled, as was clear from the thick clouds above it. It was shown on the map as being strongly protected by double and treble wire-entanglements. There were known to be deep dug-outs under the parapets of this line which, so prisoners said, were in some cases connected with the *creutes*. The French guns were concentrating their fire on what were believed to be the entrances to these. The third line ran just behind the crest of the hills, and was therefore out of sight. These three lines, connected by oblique communication trenches or switches called *Riegelstellungen*, formed the first defensive position.

On part of the front, an intermediate position ran behind the first. Then came the second position two or three miles farther back. It comprised three trench lines, generally running along the reverse slopes of the heights. There was conflicting information as to whether the third position was complete, although the enemy were known to be working at it feverishly. From the observatory at Roucy, from which one of the rare glimpses of the German back areas could be caught when the sky was clear, it seemed that the enemy's second and third positions were escaping very lightly.

Over this neighbourhood, in the direction of Choisy-au-Bac, hung the largest bunch of German sausage balloons I had ever seen, about twenty of them, incongruous truffles growing out of the sky. One of them was enormously high up; I had never seen one so high. In them men were watching, not missing a movement on the map-like surface below.

It seemed to me that the French counter-battery work must be good, since otherwise the German guns would have taken advantage of the magnificent targets constantly reported to them by their very bold aviators. These appeared here and there over the French lines, obviously noting every detail of the preparations, silver fish of the sky, darting in and out of the clouds, escorted by the smoke-puffs of the French anti-aircraft shells. Then I thought the German guns might after all be reserving their fire, or perhaps their batteries had moved back.

At one point the commander of a heavy battery drew my attention to the fact that at a certain angle, looking high, one could see the howitzer shells in flight. It was true enough; there were swarms of them soaring through the air at enormous heights, like flights of arrows fired at the sun. It seemed incredible that a shell going so



short a distance should have to rise so high. As I looked, I wondered in how many cases the lines of flight of these shells would bisect the lines of life traced by fate for soldiers in grey over there; for was not the life of each of us reduced to a mathematical problem? Did not our end simply mean that the curve of our existence had intersected that of some shell or bullet?

My map showed the enemy divisions which had been identified. The German method of defence was known. It required two counter-attacking divisions in rear for every three divisions in front line. Each division, it will be remembered, comprised three regiments of three battalions. Two regiments side by side provided the defence of the first two positions; two battalions of each regiment held the first position and the third battalion the second. The third regiment was charged with the defence of the third position.

My map also showed the position of the attacking French Armies. The stupendous battering-rams of the attack, the Fifth and Sixth Armies, lay side by side; they comprised thirty-one infantry divisions, plus two Russian brigades.

In their rear, ready to press forward between them on the evening of the first night of the attack, was the Tenth Army, the 'Army of Exploitation'. It comprised twelve divisions and two cavalry corps. Behind this formidable array yet another Army, the First, commanded by General Fayolle, waited ready to pour into the open country of the plain of Laon. It consisted of eight divisions withdrawn from the G.A.N. It was to advance straight ahead, like a plough driving a furrow, throwing to either side like clods of earth whatever German troops there might be left to oppose it as it rolled forward across the enemy's communications. But how, even if everything went as well as the most sanguine hoped, it could overtake and pass the masses of men ahead of it, none attempted to explain. The only possible solution seemed to be that General Fayolle, who was an angel and looked like a cherub, should grow the wings that would have been so becoming to him and, followed by his command, fly over thousands of his compatriots and land in enemy country beyond.

I can still remember the awe I felt every time I unfolded my map at an observation post and gazed at the lines depicting the projected advance. I do not think there can have been a more impressive document produced during the whole war than this paper. The blobs representing the component parts of the Franco-

British Armies, some two million men, were waiting to hurl themselves at those lines running over hill and dale, tenuous lines which had so far defied all the courage and all the might of the Allies.

It was particularly difficult, looking towards the German defences, to visualize the attack and to translate the arrows into marching armies. On the ground, where congestion was so clearly visible, marching columns so obviously slow and cumbersome, roads so few, transport columns so unwieldy and helpless, it was hard to picture the men in rear bursting through those ahead of them.

Remembering the catastrophic blocks after the German withdrawal, it was impossible to imagine the two cavalry corps getting past the solid mass of their own infantry and the three German defensive systems and finally, clearing away all obstructions, riding ahead of the victorious armies until the Allies and the Germans faced each other in the open field somewhere between the southern extremity of Holland and the Ardennes. Such was the meaning of the great red arrows, pointing far into enemy country, which illustrated General Nivelle's orders. The British, their right on the Sambre, were to march on Valenciennes and Louvain; the G.A.R., carrying the G.A.N. with it, was to advance on Sedan with the G.A.C. to the south of it.

If all went well we should soon be forcing the barrier of the Rhine; but meanwhile it was impossible not to be overwhelmed by a sense of the futility of the plan despite the tremendous force and awe-inspiring might by which it was being supported: a woman's improvisations backed by a giant's strength.

My own feelings are brought back clearly by a note I made on the 15th in the margin of an order. Where I was when I scribbled this I do not know. It was to this effect:

1. Nivelle refuses to believe in German withdrawal.
  2. Withdrawal described as great French victory.
  3. Nivelle assures all concerned withdrawal has little affected his plan.
  4. Hasty lengthening of front of attack to make up for miles and miles of front Germans have refused to fight on and abandoned.
- Patchwork!

And to this was pinned a strip of paper on which was written General Nivelle's words to the British on April 4th. 'The missions assigned to the different groups participating in the general offensive having

been *somewhat modified* as a result of the enemy's withdrawal and the increase in his reserves . . . ' The words 'somewhat modified' had been underlined by me; as well they might be, for out of the original fronts of attack only one remained, flanked by two new ones, recently improvised. This sense of improvisation, of the wrecking effect of the German move, was borne home to anyone coming up to the line towards the eighty-kilometre front of attack. One saw the enormous number of gun-emplacements standing useless and empty facing the old German line, and the abandoned stations and aerodromes now forty kilometres behind the front. Months of ant-like labour, millions of money wasted, one could see it all there on the ground, and one's thoughts inevitably turned to the G.A.N. immobilized and helpless, and to the British attack which had petered out uselessly from a strategic point of view. The sight of this devastated and abandoned zone brought up questions that constantly recurred and could not be laid aside; How was Nivelle's mind working? how did he expect the attack to develop?

In his instructions to the British on April 4th he had written that the operations would necessarily mean a prolonged battle, but how on earth could this be squared with his previous declarations that 'the rupture of the hostile front is possible if carried out at one blow in twenty-four or forty-eight hours', or with his pledge to the Government not to engage in a long-drawn-out struggle? Did he really know? Was he driven to a frenzy of exasperation by the sly, grim way in which the enemy had thwarted his plans, by the doubts of the politicians, by the weather? Did he feel completely out of his depth, and, not knowing what to do, was he risking everything on a gambler's throw? The fact that the greater the difficulties the longer grew the red arrows projecting into enemy country, seemed to give colour to this view. General Nivelle's method of countering the obstacles that loomed ever larger immediately ahead of him appeared to be to include fresh provinces, now in enemy hands, within the scope of his already immense plan. The more persistent the reports concerning the *creutes*, the farther the cavalry were to ride towards the Rhine. It really seemed as if General Nivelle's ambitions had increased in proportion to the difficulties facing him.

But although it is clear from my own reports and notes that I had the gravest doubts concerning the forthcoming offensive, it was not until very shortly before the attack that I became completely pessimistic as to its outcome. Up till then, although the facts I knew

made me anxious, I was deeply affected by the enthusiasm of the fighting men, and I put myself the question: If they are prepared to stake their lives, not only willingly but even enthusiastically in this endeavour, what right has a mere observer to be sceptical? I had listened to many critics of General Nivelle's plan whose pessimism was certainly justified, but were they not leaving out of account the immense fervour of the troops, and the dejection of the enemy, about which the Grand Quartier had so much to say?

Looking back after all these years, it seems to me that my real hopes, such as they were, centred on two factors: a complete faith, which was never shaken, that we would win the war somehow; and a rather dubious yet stubborn belief in the preparations on those sectors which I had not seen and knew little about. There, I felt certain, the deficiencies so obvious in the sectors I had visited would surely not exist, at least not to the same degree. Pétain, in whom the army had such faith, would surely break through on the 17th, even if Micheler failed to do so on the 16th. Pétain and the tanks. The tanks and Pétain!

On the night of the 15th I heard of the great counter-stroke launched by the Germans that morning against the Australians at Lagnicourt, just south of Bullecourt, where there had been such hard fighting a few days before.<sup>1</sup> From telephone conversations with the Fourth Army Headquarters and G.H.Q. I gathered that a dangerous advance by the enemy had been transformed into a serious reverse to them, thanks to the tough resistance of the Australians. The engagement was, however, not quite so full of dramatic incidents as I was given to understand at first, and in fact seems to have lacked some of the high-lights I find depicted in my report to the French concerning this action. For instance, no brigadier, flanked by his brigade major, had fought with bayonets, leading on an array of cooks and batmen, although the story was true of at least one battalion commander. But even the sensational account of the risk run by a brigade headquarters was not entirely fanciful, for the enemy did actually get to within three hundred and fifty yards of one of them.

The 1st Australian Division, which bore the brunt of the fighting, held the line to the right of the 4th, which had taken part in the disastrous attack on Bullecourt. It was enormously extended, holding a front of twelve thousand yards. To mislead the enemy

<sup>1</sup> See Map on page 606.

into fearing an extension of the Bullecourt attack, this division had been ordered to close up towards the German line on the night of the 13th. This manœuvre had the desired effect; but the Germans, instead of accumulating reserves as they should have done had they played the game according to our rules, anticipated the attack by assuming the offensive themselves. This they did in the early hours before dawn on the 15th. They hurled four divisions, over twenty-three battalions, about 16,000 men, against some 4,000 Australians whose front line consisted of scattered sentry-posts about two hundred yards apart. Few of these posts were wired, and owing to a further muddle there were no signal rockets with the advanced troops. Happily the enemy shelling gave some warning of danger on the greater part of the front; but a German *Guard Division* attacked without any bombardment and overran the picket line before any of our people were aware of what was happening. Luckily the defence was organized in depth according to G.H.Q.'s constant recommendations, and this, combined with the stout resistance kept up by sentry-posts and pickets, broke up the attack and gave time to organize a line of resistance save where the German *Guard*, who had advanced in silence, penetrated deeply and rapidly on the left. Time and again the attack was beaten back by disconnected posts. Nevertheless the enemy kept gaining ground down the valleys until the artillery positions, which were well forward, the guns having been advanced to support the Bullecourt attack, were overrun. Owing to carelessness or over-confidence they had no infantry detachments detailed to protect them, and worse still the gunners had left their rifles behind; they were helpless in the dark, quite unable to distinguish friend from foe. The whole of one artillery brigade was rushed and some of the gunners captured, but in practically every case breech-blocks and dial-sights had been removed and carried away. Another brigade, on the point of being overrun and unable either to fire or withdraw the guns, was ordered to retire, which it did, taking away with it the breech-blocks and dial-sights. As soon, however, as it was light and the situation somewhat clarified, the guns in rear came into their own. Some batteries put down an offensive barrage, others, running the guns out of their pits, engaged the enemy with direct fire. In some cases fire was opened at four hundred yards. Not only did the gunners suffer casualties from rifle-fire but, spotted by German balloons, they were subjected to a concentrated bombardment. Dump after dump of ammunition was

set on fire, gun after gun was hit, but the gunners held their ground and played their part in stopping the German onrush.

Light revealed the enemy deep in the Australian positions amongst our guns; but the waves of their onslaught had broken and eddied round the solid rock of the scattered Australian posts that refused to give ground. According to the Germans themselves, our Lewis guns were splendidly handled, and were probably the chief instrument, as the stout hearts of the Australians were the means, of smashing the attack.

With daylight came the first reinforcements, relieving the pressure on point after point. They found battalion headquarters, cooks, signallers and batmen fighting as determinedly as the pickets. The Australian counter-attack swept forward with the utmost enthusiasm, the Germans surrendering freely. They had been so busy looting that they had damaged only five guns. Thirty-one of the guns which had been in their possession in the morning were in action against them in the afternoon. Their attack had completely failed with heavy loss. Their Command had hoped to heighten the morale of the troops and draw British reserves away from Arras, but their pell-mell withdrawal hardly served the first purpose, and as for the second, the attack was repelled by the front line brigades and their own reserves. Not another man was moved.

If the progress made by the enemy showed the danger of a division holding a very extended line so near a sector of the front that had recently been in full eruption, on the other hand it proved the resilience and strength of the defence in depth, which like a strong wide-meshed net stretched only to enfold the assailants.

On our side several mistakes were made. The lack of protection for the guns was the most important. The fact that neither flares nor wire were provided was also serious. The moral of this engagement is that to attempt to bluff by extending too thin a line in face of a strong opponent is a dangerous business.

I do not think there can have been time for sleep that night; reports had to be drawn up and handed over to dispatch riders, some urgent messages concerning a mass of detail sent to the Fourth Army and longer messages to G.H.Q. I noted much of what I had seen, stated that the first German position had been adequately bombarded, but that it was my belief only sections of the second position had been punished in a way that on the Somme would have been considered sufficient to warrant attack. This position could not, I thought,

have received enough shells to hamper the defence seriously. On the other hand the German guns appeared to be muzzled, and the bombardment by gas shells to which they were to be submitted during the night should, I thought, prove sufficient to hold them in check.

Before starting off again into the freezing night, listening to the rain beating down, I made some notes in my diary: they are before me now. They began 'The offensive cannot succeed'. The last impression of all, the final conclusion, was a bad one; but there was more than pessimism in what I wrote, there was a note of intense personal unhappiness.

My job often caused me exquisite pain; sometimes it amounted to a kind of horror which made me beg to be relieved; on one occasion at least I was threatened with a court martial for refusing to carry on with it. The least objectionable side of it was being cursed by both sides, and viewed with suspicion by each as the devil's advocate of the other, bearing the blame commanders were apt to fasten freely on their neighbours, and being the general scapegoat, the bearer of unpleasant tidings, the mopper-up of every blotted copy-book. Then there was the intense loneliness. I was always alone, a foreigner with the French, a stranger with my own people, a visitor with a different point of view. But worst of all was undoubtedly the sense of responsibility, however mitigated it might be.

On this occasion, as often before, I examined with much critical doubt the part I had played in the negotiations preceding the offensive. My chiefs had maintained that the French, who had been responsible for the launching of the British attack, should fulfil their side of the bargain and not leave us in the air. It was impossible that they should have held any other view and, as was my duty, I had pressed it to the best of my ability. This might not have meant much, but by now I had acquired influence well beyond my military rank and had right of access to important personages. To them I had bluntly spoken of the disgrace of allowing the British success to peter out uselessly because the support which had been promised was not forthcoming. I had protested against the delay. But I had felt sick at heart at the thought that the French attack might fail through haste, and that if it did fail the position in Artois would not be changed, however many thousands of lives were sacrificed on the Aisne. Now, on the eve of the attack, I was dominated by a sense of impending disaster. It was horrible. I argued with myself, and rightly, that a short post-

ponement, the only thing possible, would have done no good; that my present pessimism was based upon mere impressions and conversations, nothing more, that there was much I did not know. I told myself that I had informed my chiefs of all the dangers involved in the rushed preparations of the French. This was all true, but an uneasy feeling of guilt remained. This was morbid, I knew; a matter of temperament, a habit of shouldering responsibility for the mistakes of others. But, however unreasonable, it caused me intense mental suffering. Indeed, looking back on those days, it seems to me that Providence could not have devised a harder fate for me than that of a liaison officer, the whipping-boy of both the armies to which I was accredited.

Before starting for the Aisne I gloomily noted in my diary how Joffre's well-balanced and carefully calculated manœuvre had gradually been transformed, until now nothing remained but a violent and brutal frontal assault. I was overwhelmed, as running over the history of the last few weeks I realized, more vividly than ever before, against what tremendous odds General Nivelle was risking the fate of his country, perhaps that of my own, perhaps, who could tell, that of the world. I recalled the events preceding and following the German withdrawal, the wilful blindness, then the bogus triumph.

The messes had echoed with the Napoleonic dicta attributed to the Commander-in-Chief, but would Napoleon have applied his dashing aphorisms in the face of a forest of wire? The great Corsican's genius was based on broad common sense. He never blinded himself to facts. I thought of the curious competition in offensive spirit we had lately witnessed between General Nivelle and General Mangin, General Micheler being reluctantly dragged at the chariot wheels of their impetuosity; the determination to rush the offensive; then the last-hour postponements to the 10th, the 14th, the 16th; and General Mangin's sudden realization that from his ground observation posts only the first German lines could be seen.

Never had I felt more dejected or unhappy than when I set out through the slush and snow towards the Aisne. I would have been unhappier still had I known that eleven of the twenty-seven first line attacking divisions had sent in similar reports. 'The first German lines are intact — we are facing certain failure.' Nor would I have been reassured had I known of the report of the G.Q.G. liaison officer to the Sixth Army, who telegraphed, 'Results of bombardment



on the first position appear to be inadequate, the second position seems to be untouched'.

These reports cannot have been unknown to General Nivelle, and they were later to justify a Deputy in saying at a secret session of the Chamber: 'It is impossible to understand how a Commander, with these documents before him, could have had the courage to give the order to attack'.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE BATTLE OF THE AISNE<sup>1</sup>

APRIL 16TH

DURING the whole of the night of the 15th-16th it poured with rain. Water deepened the puddles at the bottom of the trenches, ran in streams down the roads, and churned up the soil in the fields where troops and guns were standing, until these were gluey, sticky, reeking, stinking quagmires, lit by the sudden vivid flares of bursting shells and heaving like boiling porridge under the shock of explosions.

Water dripped off the steel helmets of hundreds of thousands of men cowering in the trenches or marching down the muddy roads, and soaked into their blue cloaks till they were heavy and stiff.

The rain beat down on hutments and hospitals. It drove into the faces of the artillery observers, blinding them as they peered into the night. Its icy contact numbed thousands of Senegalese almost to lifelessness.

All night, ceaselessly, troops covering every road and track moved forward in endless dripping columns, marching towards the red haze in the wet northern sky. Guns were coming too; these were the field battcries that were to accompany the infantry in the pursuit. Their columns shared many roads with the infantry, advancing by jerks of a few score yards at a time. Through the darkness came the smell of the horses, sweating in spite of the raw air, and the jingle of harness and chains. When the foot and mounted columns halted together, which happened every few minutes, the muffled drivers and the infantry called inquiries to each other. 'What's your regiment?' 'So you're from Verdun?' 'Did you lie alongside the — regiment? My brother's a sergeant in "A" Company. Did you see him by any chance?' The speaker's voice almost always evoked by its accent some corner of France, some distant peaceful place where the good earth had given to the men it nourished the special intonation characteristic of itself. Nothing much was said, those who called were, one felt, men whose vocabulary was limited, but what a world of longing was hidden behind the plain requests for news of friends

<sup>1</sup> See Map facing page 514.

and relations. One felt that the most unimaginative were recalling scenes in homes they hardly dared hope to see again.

If by chance one unit recognized another as coming from the same province, Normandy, Brittany, Saintonge, a subdued thrill of pleasure ran down the column, a halo of goodwill hung over the dripping men. Increased confidence, a tenser excitement, was as perceptible as light would have been.

No smoking beyond a certain line was the order; but although men's lives might have depended upon obeying it, numerous red points, half concealed in the palms of hands, pricked the darkness.

Down came the rain, but all the water in the world could not damp the ardour of the French troops. Nothing could. Their physical resistance was lowered by fatigue and exposure, but their morale stood high, as high as hope itself. Even the most untoward incidents such as the wholesale explosion of grenades did not diminish the men's determination. In a single regiment of the 68th Division, 187 men were wounded from this cause on their way up to the line. There were many such accidents that day, largely attributable to British Mills grenades, which the French did not know how to carry, the safety pin getting detached in their pockets or haversacks.

Nor did the depressing wait, after the long weary marches to which many regiments had been subjected, take the edge off their keenness. General Nivelle had really succeeded in infusing his highest expectations into the armies. They, like him, discounted the obstacles ahead and only saw the open country beyond, across which they were convinced they would be advancing next day, the cavalry ahead of them. There was no more thought of merely gaining ground; that was the dream of a landowner not of a soldier, as a military writer well imbued with the spirit of the period put it.

The falling sheets of water did not muffle the roaring, screeching sound overhead, and hardly blurred the stabbing flashes as the shells landed in murderous coveys on the distant heights where we imagined the Germans to be cowering. The drum-fire, the constant pulsating beat of thousands of explosions merging into one throbbing resonance, was in full swing, while over the Aisne Satan's own garden seemed to blossom, vivid with monstrous, beautiful, refulgent flowers of flame. Standing in water up to their waists, the men in the trenches watched, fascinated.

They were not greatly concerned with the front line, now being pulverized by the trench artillery, for they knew from raids carried

out on the previous night that it was half destroyed and empty; their interest centred in the trenches beyond, on which field artillery and howitzers were now concentrating. They watched with jubilation the pyrotechnic display, convinced that the more distant German trenches were sharing the fate of the front line.

During the latter part of the night I had moved forward with the troops, and now that the hour of attack was approaching stood watching, deafened by the clamour of some nearby howitzers and blinded by the 75's spitting fire in a mad hiccupping frenzy of rage.

Some signallers were, with what seemed unjustifiable assurance, identifying invisible topographical features. 'That must be Craonne over there, see what a gruelling the place is getting.' 'That must be Ailles where those big shells are falling', and a sentence constantly recurred, '*Qu'es qu'ils prennent, les Boches!*', the French equivalent of 'Fritz's getting it in the neck, not 'arf'.

Four-thirty. From the place where I stood, it seemed as if a finger was being slowly drawn across the sooty blackness of the eastern horizon, leaving in its track a dirty grey line, imperceptibly increasing, against which the rain became visible, giving an impression of even greater dreariness and cold than had the wretched darkness. The red glow over the area upon which the French guns were concentrating dimmed, changing as the light increased into huge spirals of grey, green and black smoke that showed opaquely through the mist hanging thickly over the Aisne hills.

The din became appalling as the 75's increased their rate of fire, their sharp unmistakable crashing bark blending into a continuous hammering howl which, loud and excruciatingly painful though it was, could not drown the whipping, ripping sound of the shells tearing through the air. Sound seemed to be fighting sound as the smaller shells, with the strident screech of a finger-nail on a slate, tore through the sonorous, pompous resonance of distant explosions. Scores of batteries, hitherto silent and concealed, were now opening fire on all sides.

Five thousand three hundred and fifty guns of all calibres, without counting the British heavy guns lent to the French, were firing on the forty-kilometres-long front of attack.

One field gun and one trench-mortar for every twenty-three metres, one heavy for every twenty-one metres of the front of attack, were working up to their terrific maximum rate of fire.

It was impossible to realize that such a bombardment, baffling the

imagination and stupefying to the senses, could be inadequate; but it was. Although far more guns were available than on the Somme, yet, because the objectives were so multiplied in depth, there were actually fewer guns per yard of trench to be attacked than had been the case in the attack of the previous year; and this without reckoning the fact that, owing to poor visibility and consequent bad or non-existent registration, many of the guns must have been firing into the 'landscape, 'making holes in nature' as the Germans say.

As the light increased it was possible to see that the slopes behind me to the south were black with troops. Cavalry in massive formations were clearly visible, the men standing to their horses; on a distant road a long column of enormous lorries was drawn up as if it too were waiting for the order to charge across the Aisne. Ahead, infantry were advancing in small columns alongside hedges, while at other points whole regiments had piled arms, and groups were formed round officers evidently giving the last explanations to their men or pointing out the objectives on sketches and maps. Comparatively few German shells were falling amongst the French, but those that did nearly all found a mark, especially some that landed amongst the guns packed wheel to wheel in the ravines extending between Paissy and Pontavert.

Suddenly a glint of sunshine bathed the whole scene in its cold light, sending wisps of fog whirling and dancing away as if they were creatures of the night caught unawares, skipping off to elude the shafts of dawn. The effect was instantaneous. A thrill of something like pleasure, excited sanguine expectation, ran through the troops. I was surrounded by the grinning faces of men whose eyes shone. Seeing my uniform some soldiers came up to me eagerly. 'The Germans won't stand here (gesticulating towards the distant hills) any more than they did before you at Arras. They fairly ran away there, didn't they?' The effect of the cheerful voices was exalted by the sparkles of light dancing on thousands of blue steel helmets. An officer showed me the orders in his hand. The last words remained in my memory and I noted them later—'We are playing our last cards. A higher courage than ever is demanded of all.'

Troops were still moving, a whole division was now assembled in an enormous field at my feet; strange harvesters, their piled arms like sheaves formed immensely long avenues, rows and rows of them,

lengthening out until they disappeared into the mist. An officer near by called to his men. 'Lie down, everyone. Two hours before we move. You must all sleep.' What chance there was of this on the sodden ground I could not surmise, and I never knew, for I went on, greeted everywhere by men with smiling faces. Some laughed. Smiles and laughter were a little strained and nervous perhaps; it could hardly have been otherwise amongst those soldiers facing such risks and such expectations.

Soon after 5.30 the sun disappeared sulkily in a wet haze; the bombardment was frantic now, the wait exasperating to the nerves. Still the German guns hardly responded. Many of them must have been withdrawn. Did they intend to retire? Was this absence of artillery fire a mere precaution or did it conceal a trap?

At two minutes to six a sudden great hush fell over the battlefield. As at Arras, it gave the impression of Death, a finger to his lips. It was extraordinary, this silence after a din that had seemed as if it must fill and re-echo round the world. In the stillness purring engines were heard. In great flights the French aircraft were making for the German lines.

At 6 to the second, the noise resumed with increased violence, while at the same time innumerable machine-guns began to crackle along the whole front, making a sound as of dry undergrowth burning fiercely while ten thousand riveters hammered in furious competition. A small copse I was looking at through my glasses was suddenly caught in a storm of French shells. Before it was swallowed in a monstrous cloud of smoke the trees could be seen flying uprooted through the air, scattered like a handful of feathers.

With straining eyes and beating hearts all tried to distinguish the special tack-tack of the German machine-guns. Was it they or the French who were raising Cain over there? It was hard to tell, though presently I saw an officer with a white face and a crucified look in his eyes who told me he was certain that the German machine-guns could not have been destroyed, for the sound of hundreds of them could easily be heard from where he had been. But this was later, and he had been much farther forward than I was when the attack opened.

The start seemed good. The German barrage gave the impression of being ragged and irregular. Hundreds of golden flares went up from the enemy lines. They had seen the French assaulting-waves and were calling their guns to the rescue.

Almost at once, or so it seemed, the immense mass of troops within sight began to move. Long thin columns were swarming towards the Aisne. Suddenly some 75's appeared from nowhere, galloping forward, horses stretched out, drivers looking as if they were riding a finish. 'The Germans are on the run, the guns are advancing', shouted the infantry jubilantly. Then it started to rain and it became impossible to tell how the assault was progressing.

I advanced farther, trying to see. I had reached a broken-down wall when there was a deafening explosion. Stones and earth flew in every direction as I flung myself or was flung down. Getting up I peered round the wall. An officer was standing there, men were running towards him, several bodies horribly mutilated lay about. The officer began to speak. He was very white and trembling. He had been talking to those others, he named them, when suddenly they had been felled like oxen. He spoke fast in a staccato voice. Suddenly blood began to drip from his sleeve and a large red stain widened on his side. His eyes all at once showed white. Two of his men caught him. I walked on, only to find that I had lost my field-glasses (the strap had been broken probably by a flying stone) and had to come back to the horrible spot and the maculated wall to look for them.

I only knew later, in some cases much later, what was happening in front and to either side of me. I never saw the heart-breaking spectacle of the Senegalese attack. We had been taught to believe theirs would be a headlong assault, a wild savage onrush. Instead, paralysed with cold, their chocolate faces tinged with grey, they reached the assault-trenches with the utmost difficulty. Most of them were too exhausted even to eat the rations they carried, and their hands were too cold to fix bayonets. They advanced when ordered to do so, carrying their rifles under their arms like umbrellas, finding what protection they could for their frozen fingers in the folds of their cloaks. They got quite a long way before the German machine-guns mowed them down.

Only slowly was it possible to get some idea of what was happening. In a dug-out in which were some preoccupied senior gunners, I unfolded my map showing the lines the attack was to reach at given hours. It was obvious that the troops were far behind their time-tables. Evidently they had not been able to keep up with the insane pace of the barrage.

My map showed the ten-kilometre bound the French Armies were expected to make beyond the German defensive system. An arrow showed the line of advance of the Fifth Army towards Sissonne, another that of the Sixth Army on Laon. The Tenth Army, whose troops I had seen filling every nook and cranny of the country I had left behind me, was represented by a big blob on the map. A third arrow between the two others showed the direction in which it was to advance. Attacking through and with these, it was to carry them forward by the impetus of its immense weight, so that pressure should not be relaxed for a moment, nor the enemy given time to recover owing to a halt of the first line troops on the conquered positions. The whole plan of the attack was staring at me from the map crudely lit by the smelly and flickering flare of a naked acetylene lamp. Brimont Fort dominating Reims was marked as falling within four hours, captured by a turning movement from the north. But the point which fixed attention unconsciously, for it had gripped the imagination of both the public and the army, was that portion of the Chemin des Dames which extended from the historic farm of Heurtebise to Craonne, along the plateau on the northern slopes of which the Forest of Vauclerc spread its thick undergrowth. It was to the I Corps, which had a magnificent fighting reputation, that the honour fell of attacking Craonne, while the II Colonial Corps, largely composed of Mangin's blacks, the Senegalese, was to carry Vauclerc.

The delay reported by the gunners was disturbing as well as disappointing. All the first accounts agreed that the attack had started well, and that in all cases the French troops had raced for the enemy. No trumpets or drums cheered them on with martial blare and urgent beat as at Charleroi. Instead, the infantry dashed forward to the explosive tune of the 75's, whose lashing shells seemed like whips compelling forward waves that needed no urging. The field guns were firing in such a frenzy of speed that madness and noise appeared to have become synonymous terms, and to their insane tempo the French infantry advanced, seemingly irresistible, gaining ground at great speed, save at some points where German machine-guns mowed them down to a man. This was the case of the splendid 1st Division of the I Corps, so long our neighbour on the Somme, which was stopped dead by machine-gun fire opposite Craonne. As they left their trenches, the first waves were felled on the parapets.

When every unit displayed such magnificent qualities of courage



and determination, it seems invidious to pick out any division as having specially distinguished itself; nevertheless even amongst so much gallantry it would seem that by common consent the 40th Division, which literally hurled itself at the German defences in front of Mont Sapigneul, and the 14th Division, which rushed forward in a way that caused all beholders to wonder, are worthy of special mention.

The headlong pace of the advance was nowhere long maintained. There was a perceptible slowing down, followed by a general halt of the supporting troops which had been pressing steadily forward since zero hour. German machine-guns, scattered in shell-holes, concentrated in nests, or appearing suddenly at the mouths of deep dug-outs and *creutes*, took fearful toll of the troops now labouring up the rugged slopes of the hills.

In a very short time after the attack was launched, the I Colonial Corps on the left, facing the woods west of Anizy-le-Château, found its waves broken, thinned and delayed, as it progressed through the forest. It was impossible to keep up with the barrage. When the attacking infantry came up to the German trenches, it found them protected by felled trees intermingled with barbed wire. The French heavies had turned these obstacles into impassable obstructions. As everywhere else, the barrage was timed to move forward at far too fast a rate, and the men were handicapped in their movements by the three-days' rations with which they were loaded to sustain them in the territory to be captured beyond the hills.

Everywhere the story was the same. The attack gained ground at most points, then slowed down, unable to follow the barrage which, progressing at the rate of a hundred yards in three minutes, was in many cases soon out of sight. As soon as the infantry and the barrage became dissociated, German machine-guns were conjured as if by magic from the most unlikely places and opened fire, in many cases from both front and flanks, and sometimes from the rear as well, filling the air with a whistling sound as of scythes cutting hay. On the steep slopes of the Aisne, the troops, even unopposed, could only progress very slowly. The ground, churned up by the shelling, was a series of slimy slides with little or no foothold. The men, pulling themselves up by clinging to the stumps of trees, were impeded by wire obstacles of every conceivable kind.

'We were faced', ran one report, 'not by barbed wire entanglements but by a forest of wire. . . . Machine guns appeared every-





*(top)* A BRITISH 60-POUNDER GUN  
*(bottom)* SENEGALESE

where from the hidden mouths of concealed caves, there were traps of every description, the ground was apparently impassable.'

Meanwhile the supporting troops were accumulating in the assault trenches at the rate of a fresh battalion every quarter of an hour. As the leading waves were held up, in some cases a few hundred yards and seldom as much as half to three quarters of a mile ahead, this led to congestion and in some cases to the greatest confusion. Had the German guns been as active as their machine-guns, the massacre which was going on in the front line would have been duplicated upon the helpless men in the crowded trenches and on the tracks in rear.

General Mangin, inevitably unaware of the exact situation but informed that the attack was not progressing according to plan, was using every endeavour to press the troops on. At 8.10 a.m. he ordered the guns to move forward to make up for lost time. A little later when the VI Corps facing the Chemin des Dames had been brought to a standstill, and the Corps Commander ordered the artillery preparation to be resumed, General Mangin issued the following order: 'The resumption of the preparation is a bad solution. It proves that the troops hesitate to advance. Our artillery preparation cannot have allowed the enemy to establish a continuous line of machine-guns. You must take advantage of the gaps and pass beyond the islands of resistance'. This the doomed troops attempted to do, the survivors courageously pressing on where they could, all unconscious that their Commander thought they were 'hesitating to advance'. The General issued another order that 'where the wire is not cut by the artillery it must be cut by the infantry. Ground must be gained', but this order did not reach the soldiers whose bodies now hung grotesquely on the German wire.

The I Colonial Corps was ordered on in the same way by the imperious Army Commander, only in the end, after reaching Lafaux Mill, to be swept back into its assault trenches.

Only one piece of good news was received from this sector: the Corps artillery commander reported that the one local success obtained, the occupation of a hill called the Mont des Singes, lost later, had been achieved thanks to the heavy and accurate fire of British guns lent to the French. This result was all the more satisfactory as, according to this report, the British batteries had been subjected to very violent shelling. At the end of the day they had only two hundred rounds left.

The Fifth Army was encountering the same difficulties as the Sixth and its story was much the same.

The Commander of the XXXII Corps, General Passaga, was so convinced that the attack had failed about Berry-au-Bac that he proposed withdrawing his troops to their starting trenches so as to re-initiate the bombardment, but was snubbed by his Army Commander, General Mazel, who declared that there could be no question of abandoning any of the conquered ground. It was this same General Mazel who informed the Minister for War a few days later, when the latter visited him at his headquarters, that the attack on the 16th was simply an impossible operation and that both he and General Micheler had vainly attempted to warn the Commander-in-Chief. 'But', exclaimed the Minister, 'did you not declare a few days before the battle to the President of the Republic that your troops would capture Brimont Fort at 10 in the morning?'

'How could I have done otherwise in the presence of the Commander-in-Chief?' he answered. 'We had categorical orders not to express the least objection nor to formulate the least doubt before the President or any Minister.'

The weather, which was getting worse, helped to depress the spirits of the men. At one moment it was snowing, at another water came down in sheets. Between Ailles and Craonne the black and grey clouds of the explosions were as thick as if scores of factory chimneys were belching smoke, which spread continuously in dangerous-looking slow-motion waves that rolled and climbed over each other in an ever-rising tide towards the sky, while over them a flotsam of debris was projected, that turned and swirled high in the air.

The attacking waves of men vanished into shell-holes. Few battalion commanders had more than an approximate idea of where exactly their companies were. Every now and then the silhouettes of a line of soldiers could be seen outlined against the horizon. They would appear to stand immobile for a few moments, then be swallowed up in the landscape.

Meanwhile at the G.Q.G. news was impatiently and anxiously awaited. Little came. This silence was not only nerve-racking, it boded evil. Rain came down torrentially, darkening the stone and obscuring the panes of the old Palace of Compiègne. At 10.30 a.m. a telegram announced that fighting was taking place in the

first and second German positions and that the Tenth Army had not advanced as it should have done by now; that was all. The peculiar stillness of bad days brooded over the idle offices. At about the same time similar news reached General Pétain, whose Army was to attack next day. '*C'est raté, j'en étais sûr*' he said.

At noon the VII Corps captured Courcy, Loivre and Berméricourt, and the XXXII Corps gained a footing in the second German position between the Aisne and the Miette stream. At other points a precarious hold of the first German line was maintained. The V Corps was unable to advance.

On the left, the II Colonial Corps and the XX Corps of the Sixth Army reached the crest of the Chemin des Dames but were unable to progress beyond, and even this slight advance was threatened by German islands of resistance from which machine-guns were firing into the backs of the attackers, making all communication and the sending up of reinforcements impossible.

The XX and VI Corps were fighting desperately in the woods about the mouths of the *creutes* and deep shelters. Nowhere could they advance beyond the first or second German lines. Time and again, when the French succeeded in driving the Germans underground, the men, mad with rage and furious at their losses, threw whole stocks of captured grenades down the steps, as well as incendiary bombs when these were available. Little or no mercy was shown, quarter was seldom asked for or given in those close furious struggles where fear and anger, inextricably mingled, served to obliterate the acquired feelings of civilized man. But although under the stress of fierce excitement there were many examples of savagery shown that day, I saw for myself at least one act of infinite kindness. Several gas shells landed near where I was standing and the order to put on gas masks was given. A wounded German sat helplessly by; several men made signs to him to put his mask on, some half removed theirs to shout, 'Put on your mask, you idiot'. With tears streaming down his face, making incongruous tattoo-like streaks on his muddy cheeks, he pointed to the empty smashed satchel round his neck. A huge French soldier, looking ferocious under a week's growth of beard, came up to him and taking off his own mask roughly clamped it on to the German's face, then walked off, his handkerchief, an enormous dirty affair the size of a napkin and printed in red checks, over his mouth.

At one point on a track I saw a group of old Territorials halted.

They were leaning over two of their number, just killed by a shell, and were collecting their identity discs and papers. Their faces, old haggard faces covered with grey stubble, were unmoved. The war had bent their bodies, and from their attitude it seemed as if, having plumbed the depths of suffering, nothing more could touch them. Very quietly and slowly they carried out this last duty, then placed their dead comrades by the side of the way, their helmets over their faces. This done they lifted their heavy loads, each helping the other, and between them carried the boxes of grenades that had been borne thus far by those two stretched out by the track. They knew the contents were badly needed up there, where maybe their own sons were facing the Germans in the front line. Slowly, staggering a little under their burdens, resigned with the sublime hopeless resignation of worn-out horses, ready to do their duty till they dropped, they went on their way towards the inferno of fire that was their destination.

Groups of prisoners were coming back. I watched some halted before an interpreter, who was questioning them with all the arrogance his four foot six and badly balanced pince-nez permitted. The Germans were anxious to please, said they were glad to be prisoners, that they were hungry. What was it that made men who presumably had been fighting bravely an hour before so despicable? Moral courage is, it seems, far rarer than physical pluck, and the man who would not hesitate to die fighting dares not look his captor in the eyes. It may be that when his blood is no longer up and he feels helpless, the average man gives in as the wounded sometimes did. These Germans had the manner and aspect of slaves; they had lost their manhood; I was always convinced that the humblest Tommy would never behave so. Prisoners who showed haughtiness and disdain always appealed to me, and I was glad when I saw such men; they made me feel proud and satisfied, whereas the other kind made me feel sick, for they revealed something of the foulest, the most loathsome side of war.

As I moved on I came upon the entrance to a subterranean dressing station. A continuous stream of stretcher-bearers were making their way towards it down a trench, shouting for room to advance with their loads. Soldiers of all kinds were there, Senegalese lying in the mud trying to get out of the way of the heavily-laden men, and slightly wounded *poilus* speaking loud to give expression in their limited vocabulary to what they had seen, using

the same coarse expression over and over again but in varying tones to round off a description where appropriate words failed. All were frozen, the teeth of many were chattering. Forlorn, wounded German prisoners, grouped together and waiting till after the others for attention, excited pity. The French gave them food, chocolate.

At the end of the forenoon it would have been no exaggeration to say that the attacking infantry on the whole front of battle was exhausted and in many cases disorganized. Quite apart from the unavoidable dislocation occasioned by the enemy's resistance, a dangerous faltering in the will to advance became manifest. When at 1 p.m. the tanks upon which so many hopes were centred appeared about Juvincourt, the infantry was in the main unable to follow them.

The machines arrived late. The great mass of five groups (some eighty machines), operating on the XXXII Corps front, reached the attacking infantry from two to four hours behind schedule, having been quite unable to follow the time-tables. When they did appear the attack had petered out, and the troops could not be induced to follow the machines that drew such hellish fire to themselves. It was an agonizing sight to watch their gallant efforts to advance. It seemed as if none could escape for long such a concentration of fire, and few of them did.

Each individual tank, as soon as it was spotted by the enemy, was enveloped in flame and smoke as salvo after salvo burst about it; then out it would crawl, turning this way and that in a moving fence of explosions.

The fate of the three groups of tanks (some forty-eight machines) which attacked with the V Corps in the direction of la Ville-aux-Bois was particularly awful. The German planes had seen them coming up and reported them to the artillery, whose shells followed their progress up to the front lines rather blindly without doing much damage. When they reached the trenches and the churned-up ground of no-man's-land their difficulties began. A bridge over the first German trench had been begun for them but was not finished by the time they arrived. Engineers first, then the escorting infantry, very gallantly attempted to complete the work, but the German fire soon made this impossible. The leading tank hesitated, then attempted to cross by the uncompleted bridge. It fell forward, hopelessly ditched. A moment later it was on fire. The others



stopped irresolute, then attempted to deploy in the morass. The delay was fatal. The German guns were on them. Machine after machine, festooned with reserve petrol cans, caught fire, and in a few seconds they were red glowing masses of metal, incinerators of their roasted crews. The exits were too small in most instances for them to escape. Many a man, a mass of flames, was seen jumping from the machine and rolling about for a few moments on the ground. The commander of the main tank attack met his end in this way. Out of forty-eight machines engaged, thirty-two were destroyed. It speaks well for the tank teams that those who were not burnt to death took out their machine-guns and joined in the fighting.

Each group of sixteen machines was escorted by a company of infantry which had been trained with it. Before the front lines were reached these troops were so tired by the length of their march, and the constant effort needed to get their tanks over obstacles, that they were completely worn out. Many battalion commanders, caring little for tanks and greatly obsessed by the danger of their own position, commandeered these troops as welcome reinforcements.

The fact that tanks would be employed had been an open secret for weeks. Wonderful tales had been spread of the havoc they would make, and the infantry had rejoiced that they would be supported by them. The sight of the machines lumbering over the back areas had delighted the reserves, but when the troops observed that they drew the fire of every German gun they were disconcerted, and when they saw them blazing by the score they were frightened.

Some observers thought that there must have been many cases of spontaneous combustion, due either to petrol fumes in the tanks ignited by nearby explosions, or simply to the shock of bullets on the walls, or even to the heat in the machines themselves.

One group of tanks penetrated the enemy's lines to a great depth, reaching the wood astride the railway south-east of Amifontaine, seven kilometres from the starting line, and was destroyed there. At other points the tanks, which proved to be very blind, apparently passed through the front lines of infantry without knowing they were doing so. In spite of their losses the tanks were masters for the whole afternoon of a considerable area about Juvincourt; but this real success came to nothing owing to lack of co-operation by the infantry, which refused to come on in spite of signals that there was no enemy in sight. Tank commanders walked back and interviewed

infantry commanders, who declared that they had no reserves to take advantage of the situation. The infantry in fact showed dislike and distrust of the new weapon as soon as they had experience of it in action. In one case within my knowledge, the infantry refused to follow the tanks, on the ground that their supporting artillery would not answer their call for a moving barrage, which proved that infantry trained to follow a barrage would trust to no other form of protection when advancing. Thus, although the enemy infantry bolted at their approach, the success the tanks achieved at some points was wasted. In certain cases the fire they drew actually retarded the infantry by causing it to hang back, from which I concluded, and this view was endorsed by the French Staff, that especially powerful counter-battery work was essential wherever tanks were employed, and that no tanks should ever remain in close formation within artillery range.

From about 2.30 p.m. the Germans began to launch massive counter-attacks. Some, like that against the XXXII Corps, were successful. Farther to the right Berméricourt was lost, and on the left the I Colonial Corps, as has been said, was thrown back into its assault trenches.

Despondency was spreading to the reserves; the waiting columns which should by now have been well beyond the Aisne were still halted, only two regiments having crossed the river. The impatient eagerness of the men was fast turning to dejection. The infantrymen, familiar with the mechanism of battle, realized things were going completely awry. The word went round '*On est tombé sur un bec*', the French equivalent of 'stymied'. Prisoners confirmed the opinion already formed by the rank and file that the attack had failed, by declaring that they had expected it that morning. Slightly wounded men, the type of soldiers who find excuses for wandering to the rear, told their tale and helped to spread depression. But hope dies hard; I observed that all were on the look-out for any cheering rumour, which was at once believed. I was assured several times by regimental officers that Pétain (who I knew was not attacking till next day) had broken through east of Reims. They spoke eagerly, hoping I would confirm the news. I could but be evasive, saying I did not know.

During the whole battle it was very evident that the artillery air observation was bad. For this the weather was not alone to blame; there was another fault which had long been apparent. The artillery

observation had, for some time past, proved to be of very poor quality. This was inherent in the system. The officers were as gallant as any, and should have been highly qualified since they were in fact often the real battery commanders, but being generally drawn from other arms they had little or no technical knowledge. The artillery did not look after or encourage them, with the result that keen men tried hard not to be included in this band of 'nobody's children'. Children in fact they often were, young and inexperienced, and the casualties amongst them were enormous.

A further difficulty under which the French laboured was the habitual lack of liaison between infantry and artillery, and between the component parts of the infantry attack. Reports did not get back in time, lateral communications could not be established, and the attack, as usual, was reduced, like a blinded Cyclops, to groping its way slowly. It was always the same tale; assailant or defender would be reduced to pulp by his own guns, the victim of some error of transmission to the artillery, the mistake of an observer, the death of a runner, all the myriad hazards of the battlefield. There were also and inevitably very many occasions when all the prayers and curses of the despairing infantry could not bring down the protective barrage that would have annihilated a counter-attack or saved a position. The Command never knew the situation accurately and in time, the gunners lived in a land of mirage in which trenches and their occupants were for ever changing hands or moving to unrecorded points on maps and plans. But there were other and inexcusable mistakes. In some cases heavy-artillery batteries had been sent propelling-charges that did not correspond with the calibre of shell they were using. At times, owing to the shortage of artillery ammunition which made itself felt early in the day in many sectors, the French barrage waxed so thin that the infantry which was to follow it went through it without noticing it.

It was all too evident also that the French aircraft had failed to gain mastery of the air. The fighters were unable to make any headway against the extremely strong German formations. The liaison and artillery observation planes, severely handicapped by the weather, driven back or shot down by superior enemy forces, were unable to direct the fire of the guns, to give effective support to the infantry, or even in most cases to locate it. The ground-flares lighted by the troops served merely, owing to the lack of command of the air, to inform the enemy aircraft where the French infantry was.

Only those who have found themselves under a sky dominated by hostile aircraft can realize the depressing effect of this on the infantry, and how, on the other hand, the approach of a friendly plane can cheer desperate men.

As has already been said, the rank and file had imagined that, as soon as the armies advanced, enormous reserve air-formations would appear and sweep clear the German-infested sky. They had thought the previous inactivity of their own aircraft must mean that Nivelles and Mangin had a good trick up their sleeve. The actual situation as they saw it with their own eyes was shattering to their morale.

The battlefield itself, on which were scattered so many crashed or burnt machines, told its own tale. It was a gloomy if illuminating commentary on the tactics followed during the previous days when, under pretext of not giving away the preparations, the fighting squadrons had remained quiescent in their distant aerodromes. The consequence was that while they were indulging in these ostrich-like tactics the enemy had had every opportunity for observation and photography the weather permitted, every facility to note the many French heavy-artillery sidings which were not camouflaged, the camps, the immense accumulation of stores at stations, the dumps, the crowded roads. They had also enjoyed freedom to complete existing aerodromes and establish new ones unknown to the French.

The severest losses were probably sustained during the early part of the afternoon. The French attacking troops were inextricably mixed as they telescoped into each other on the halted front line. Many, very many officers fell, exposing themselves in an endeavour to lead forward or rally their men. At several points there was a shortage of small arms ammunition. Progress was attempted down communication trenches by grenade-throwing, but the French were very short of these missiles for, as has been seen, the Command had decided to load them with provisions for the advance beyond the German lines, in preference to providing them more amply with the wherewithal to break through. One division applied for 40,000 grenades, but the Army, only having 8,000 to 10,000 in reserve, could not send up more than 3,000.

As the afternoon wore on, things went from bad to worse for the II Colonial Corps clinging to the plateau of Vauclerc. The first lines were clamped to the ground on the brow of the steep northern slopes of the plateau leading down to the Ailette, by the fire of German

machine-guns untouched by the French bombardment. This was the gala day of these infernal weapons; they sprinkled death unhindered, as with a watering-can. Never before had so many been in action at once. In a single copse called the Petit Bois des Boches no less than a hundred of them were captured.

The abnormally heavy losses suffered by the French supporting-battalions proved to what extent the enemy machine-guns had been able to indulge in aimed fire, undisturbed by the French barrages, which were, in many cases, coming down thousands of yards behind them. Here and there a few small parties of Frenchmen, taking advantage of the available cover, gained a little ground; but presently after suffering very heavy losses they, together with the main bodies, wavered and fell back over the crest. Here they found the second line supporting-battalions and became mixed up with them. The same thing happened in the case of the third line battalions, with the exception of a few units which it was possible to stop in time and halt either in the old first line trenches or the first German ones. Subordinate commanders sought instructions frantically. Some attempted to carry out the original orders; others, wise or bewildered, did nothing. Meanwhile the guns, like pistons working furiously in an engine with broken cylinders, served only to increase the damage. Blind, deaf and dangerous, they either pounded their own people or churned up the mud of empty fields miles behind the German lines.

Sometimes they pounded unoccupied ground a mile ahead, at others again they cruelly punished the exhausted leading waves. At the end of the day the barrage, after all its blind pounding and rolling backwards and forwards, came to rest along the greater part of the front on the same line it had been on half an hour after the attack began.

To add to the confusion caused by the cutting of all unburied telephone lines and the impossibility of using visual signalling, there was a shortage of Very lights and flares of all kinds. On the eve of the attack the colours and types of light signals were changed so as to mislead the enemy, but in many cases the infantry did not receive the new equipment.

I saw later the letter of a company commander who certainly voiced the complaint of many when he wrote: 'The battery which was to cover us fired short. We were smothered by its shells, but how could we warn it? My company had no light signals'.

But while some battery commanders were under the misappre-

hension that their guns, almost at red heat, were doing great execution, others were vouchsafed no such comforting illusion. Having run short of shells they were compelled to cease fire. The ammunition supply was immobilized, like everything else, by traffic blocks on a scale unheard-of even in a war celebrated for inextricable hold-ups. On the Juvincourt front the all important 155mm. howitzers ran short of shells in the early part of the morning. At very many points the turgid, slow-moving streams of vehicles and men froze into complete immobility, as if turned to ice by the blizzard. All agreed that the traffic arrangements were greatly inferior to those made on the Somme and at Verdun in the previous year.

The general breakdown extended well beyond the battle zone. It was only later I learnt that difficulties in rear were due not only to inability to cope in haste with very difficult conditions on an improvised front, but to inexcusable bureaucratic rivalries. One bitterly fought-out struggle between slingers of ink and blotting-paper fans resulted in the great railhead station of Conantre being *unused though sorely needed*. *It remained through the early stage of the battle a no-man's-land across which Homeric red-tape tugs-of-war were fought between militarized bureaucrats and uniformed Bumbles.*

While the 'back of the front' heroes fought out their venomous but bloodless engagements, a struggle of another kind was raging on the slimy slopes of the battlefield. In the uncertain light of the late afternoon, hidden defenders began to swarm out of the *creutes* and the cunningly concealed tunnels honeycombing the plateau in rear of the packed French lines. Where this happened the effect was instantaneous. Believing they were being fired upon by their own people, whole portions of the front line came rushing back maddened by anger and fear. A terrible struggle began in which the Germans, familiar with the ground, their weapons clean and ready, had every advantage, whereas the French found, a common experience along the whole battle line, that their weapons, machine-guns, automatic rifles and even rifles were clogged and rendered useless by the mud, into which the equipment thrown away by the overloaded soldiers had already sunk. Here and there groups of French were still struggling forward, but by far the greater part of the front line troops were fully engaged in repelling hostile counter-attacks, which grew bolder and more numerous as the day wore on.

The Germans, having measured the weight of the attack and

feeling it spent, became constantly more aggressive, and their guns, as the light began to fade out of the grey sky, played with increasing effect on the massed reserves telescoped into each other. Their machine-guns were now operated more boldly, their counter-attacks launched with greater determination. Had the French troops not been of the bravest, had they lacked courage of the highest kind, there might easily have been a panic, but they fought on grimly. Every corner of the seared, sopping battlefield witnessed bitter, merciless struggles between men in clothes stiff with water and mud, and blinded by driving snow and rain. The scenario of these minor battles was practically always the same. They were heralded by very accurate German artillery fire concentrated on the point of attack. The ground the Germans intended recapturing would be turned into a field of smoke and flame under a roaring, screeching sky that seemed about to collapse, forcing down the heads of the defenders; trenches would rock and cave in under the violence of the explosions, then the air would buzz as the steel wasps of the German machine-gun bullets came over in their scores of thousands. Suddenly the range would lengthen and, looming out of the smoke of the last explosion, shadowy forms would rush forward gesticulating wildly, enemy soldiers throwing grenades.

Every hour that passed was telling against the French.

The Commander of the I Colonial Corps facing Laffaux ordered a fresh artillery preparation in view of a renewed attack. Once more the great howitzer shells mewed overhead, as with vertiginous speed they rose, tearing and ripping the upper air. The sound was lost for a few moments, then as the great columns of smoke arose from where the projectiles had landed, the hair-raising screech of a fresh flight would be heard and its clamour would mingle with the muffled roar of distant explosions.

The attack was launched at 6 p.m. and failed miserably; Mont des Singes and Moisy Farm, occupied earlier, had to be evacuated. The 14th Division which had attacked with such splendid dash, lost by nightfall practically all the ground it had gained and suffered extremely heavy casualties.

As dusk fell, in that sector of the front where the I Colonial and VI Corps were fighting, the 75's, believing the front line to have fallen back, opened fire on ground where there were still troops, principally Senegalese. Leaderless, the blacks began to gyrate help-

lessly on the Vauclerc plateau, a prey to machine-guns firing upon them from all sides, pounded by their own guns, so bewildered they had not even the initiative to take cover in trenches where these existed. They were unarmed, for their swollen and blistered fingers could not clear their weapons of their thick coating of mud, yet when by chance an officer or N.C.O. they knew rallied them, these very gallant fellows fought with grenades, the only weapon their frozen hands could use, while at close quarters they still wielded the formidable *coupe coupe*, the great curved swinging scimitar they all carried. One battalion which had reached the neighbourhood of Ailles was practically exterminated; others fared scarcely better. From all sides poured in reports that the Senegalese regiments had, in most cases, ceased to exist as corporate units. One division reported all its brigade commanders, three regimental commanders and two battalion commanders either killed or wounded. Two regiments of three battalions had only one unwounded field officer each, while another had not a single officer left. The II Colonial Corps reported that the 2nd Colonial Infantry Regiment had lost very heavily, including its three battalion commanders. A Senegalese battalion had disappeared. As for the 57th Colonial Regiment, its French battalion still existed as an organized unit but the two black ones were completely broken. A battalion of the 6th Colonial Infantry Regiment had strayed into the German lines. The Corps Commander stated that no attack was possible without a fresh artillery preparation, and that all he could do was to hold his ground in view of German counter-attacks reported as pending.

The losses of the blacks were appalling. Out of 25,000, 10,000 had been engaged, and according to General Mangin's orderly officer 6300 of these were killed, wounded or missing. Nevertheless a few units maintained some cohesion when enough white cadres remained, and fought bravely enough in spite of their physical disabilities. Pathetic and gigantic pantaloons, they limped forward with rifles at whose ends Europeans had fixed bayonets; but the majority of the survivors, with none to lead them, streamed back in bewildered groups. As they ambled back they soon recovered their composure. Fear had probably never penetrated their thick skulls. Grinning at those they met, they declared in pidgin French 'Boche no good, me go Paris in motor car'. Deambulating they went with rolling gait, rolling head, rolling eyeballs, repeating endlessly '*Ya pas bon, ya pas bon*'. They swarmed in bands over the



back area, sodden, soiled, unarmed, spreading unspcakable discouragement, for if there is such a thing as the materialization of a shattered dream they embodied it, the miserable vacant-eyed Punchinellos the army had pictured rushing triumphantly over all obstacles in pursuit of a terrified and demoralized enemy. None could stop their flight, for they did not understand either threat or oburgation. They presented no more grip to authority than a wild animal which knows only its trainer. They invaded stations, boarded trains and clambered on to lorries, grinning and pathetic. They got as far back as Courlandon, behind General Mangin's headquarters, in the early part of the afternoon. What can General Mangin have thought, he the Colonial soldier *par excellence*, whose name was linked with that of the black troops, if by any chance he saw those disorganized bands? Soon the terrible nickname, an untranslatable pun, was to be given him: '*Mangin, broyeur de noir*'. (The crusher of black. To crush black is a French colloquialism meaning to brood, to be depressed.)

Ambulance trains loaded with wounded brought back the news to Paris that the blacks were overrunning the back areas. 'The Senegalese are invading the ambulances.' The report spread like wildfire. It reached the War Office, and the Minister inquired by telephone from the G.Q.G. whether it rested on any foundation of fact, and was told it was pure fabrication.

But while official *communiqués* were reassuring the people of Paris, the blacks, wandering back in droves, had actually invaded the hospitals, terrifying the distracted nurses, adding an element of incongruity to the ghastly drama in which they were involved.

The scenes that were unfolded there were amongst the most terrible of the whole war. They were prolonged for many days. The drama had begun on the previous evening when desperate efforts to be ready for the rush of wounded were made by doctors, orderlies and nurses. At Mont-Notre-Dame, an evacuation hospital supposed to accommodate four thousand wounded, there were no cups or other receptacles available. The nurses spent the entire night, to the accompaniment of the ceaseless thunder of the bombardment, bevelling the edges of condensed milk tins, so that in the morning when the wounded and dying began to arrive they could be given, if nothing else, a drink of water.

And soon after dawn they began to trickle in, prostrate on stretchers, in their heavy boots and greatcoats, covered with mud and

blood. But these were not the men the nurses expected, were used to; mangled, but gallant and very courteous. These men were broken in spirit as well as in body; not a laugh among them, not a smile of greeting. They were discouraged as French wounded had never been discouraged before.

'It's all up,' they said, 'we can't do it, we shall never do it'. '*C'est impossible*', and the words whispered from ashen lips swept over the rows of stretchers like a cold gust rustling dead leaves and dead hopes in a cemetery.

In this particular hospital a German aviator deemed to be mad swept down and machine-gunned the wooden huts; hastily the stretchers were brought into the open, but the horrible lunatic came round again shooting the helpless men. One nurse was shot through the back as she bent over a wounded man comforting him. 'He must be drunk', said the principal medical officer shrugging his shoulders. The surgeons worked like lunatics, the single amputating-saw was carried at the run from one operating theatre to the other; but despite all efforts the ever-increasing flow of wounded could not be dealt with. It was the same in the other hospitals. In some, wounded awaiting operations were kept waiting for days. Some actually died of hunger, more of gas gangrene.

The degree of confusion that prevailed may be gauged from the fact that the Staff had laid down that arrangements should be made for dealing with ten thousand wounded only. The medical service, slightly less optimistic had added five thousand to this figure, whereas during the course of the offensive no less than ninety thousand wounded were evacuated.

While scenes were being enacted in the hospitals which were to justify the statement by a Head Nurse to an inspecting Medical General a few days later, that the entrance to her hospital should bear the same motto as that of Dante's *Inferno*, 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here', the dreary struggle on the Aisne went on.

On the right, the Commanders of the VII and XXXII Corps had decided earlier in the day to renew the offensive after a fresh artillery preparation against Spin and Sapigneul hills, but this attempt also failed. On its success depended the tactical plan for the capture of Brimont, which was to have fallen to an advance from the north after the high ground was captured; but as the Germans knew exactly what the French intended, owing to the papers captured during the Sapigneul fighting, and had in consequence heavily

reinforced this sector, the French efforts were foredoomed to failure. The losses of the VII Corps alone amounted to fifteen thousand men.

By the end of the day the XXXII Corps was back in its assault trenches. The 3rd Russian Brigade was partially engaged on the front of the XXXII Corps, but the heaviest fighting was borne by the 1st Russian Brigade on the Brimont front.

It captured the village of Courcy, south of Brimont, although one of the attacking battalions lost three-quarters of its number during the first rush. By the end of the day the Russians had lost about half their men. The Russian soldiers, having decided to fight, did so extremely well, but not so some of the officers. Much of the responsibility of leadership fell on the sixty-three French officers who were attached to the Brigade and wore Russian uniform; thirteen of them were killed. The Russian soldiers knew their own officers neglected them, they spoke of them as drunkards, and after that day they felt they could despise them all because some had lacked courage.

As daylight ended, the Germans counter-attacked everywhere, too often successfully, against the disorganized and exhausted French. Desperate fights were waged here and there, but the odds were against the French, now universally short of grenades and munitions; but successful as was the enemy in the main, he did not regain lost ground in every case; for instance, on the extreme right no less than nineteen counter-attacks were repulsed, several with the help of captured German grenades. The 9th Division also repulsed a heavy German attack with great loss.

At other points the French hung on precariously, stunned by the sense of defeat but clinging bravely to the shreds of ground they had torn from the enemy at the cost of so much blood. Behind them at many points groups of Germans, based on their deep and mysterious tunnels, held out.

It was now dark. Out of a sky the colour of bilge-water came in turn snow, sleet and rain, distinguishable from each other only by the tongue on the moustache; the skin was too cold to tell the difference. There were dead horses everywhere. Many had died from the effects of gas shells or from wounds, but at least half had succumbed to exposure combined with lack of food.

Stragglers in increasing numbers were sneaking back. Many a wounded and helpless man, whose only hope lay in the stretcher-bearers finding him, thought his prayers had been answered when

silent figures approached, only to find his last chance gone and low thieves rifling his pockets. Such men were rightly shot at sight if caught, but who could tell what was going on amidst the shell-holes that night?

The remnants of the Senegalese who still had white officers held their ground heroically, clutching their useless weapons in numbed hands, their frozen legs up to the knees in mud.

It was abundantly clear that the French losses were extremely heavy. The evidence of one's own eyes proclaimed the fact only too clearly. They proved to be even heavier than the most pessimistic had anticipated, though how many fell that day will never be known exactly. To take but one example, the I Corps in the four days from April 16th to the 20th had one whole regiment of three battalions, the 208th, practically annihilated, and one division lost 89 officers and nearly 4,000 men.

During the first ten days of the offensive, the French lost 29,000 killed on the field of battle, the greater proportion of whom died on the morning of the 16th, besides 5000 who died in forward ambulances. For the same period there were 90,000 wounded, lightly and seriously, a proportion of whom died, and 20,000 missing, including prisoners. There were startling discrepancies between the figures of casualties put forward by the military authorities and the parliamentarians in the months after the offensive. The figures I give are those of Monsieur Painlevé, who discussed them with me personally. He had reliable documents, and when I went through them with him he had long since ceased to look upon the whole question otherwise than objectively.

It was thought at the time, with what justification I cannot tell, that the very high proportion of killed to wounded in some parts of the battlefield meant that in a great number of cases the enemy had given no quarter.

That night I visited a number of commanders. Reports concerning the immense strength of the German defences were pouring in, but as was often the case, those who had not been in the front line tended to discount the difficulties the attacking troops had met. One officer, however, made a penetrating observation which came back to my mind later when all the facts were known. Looking over the different reports and messages that lay before him spread out on a rickety table in a cellar, he said the fact was that the Germans had industrialized war, and had adapted the system of mass production

to their defensive organization. The truth of this remark was proved when it was discovered later that the German defensive plans were always the same, modified in detail only according to the ground, thus enabling the whole equipment to be standardized.

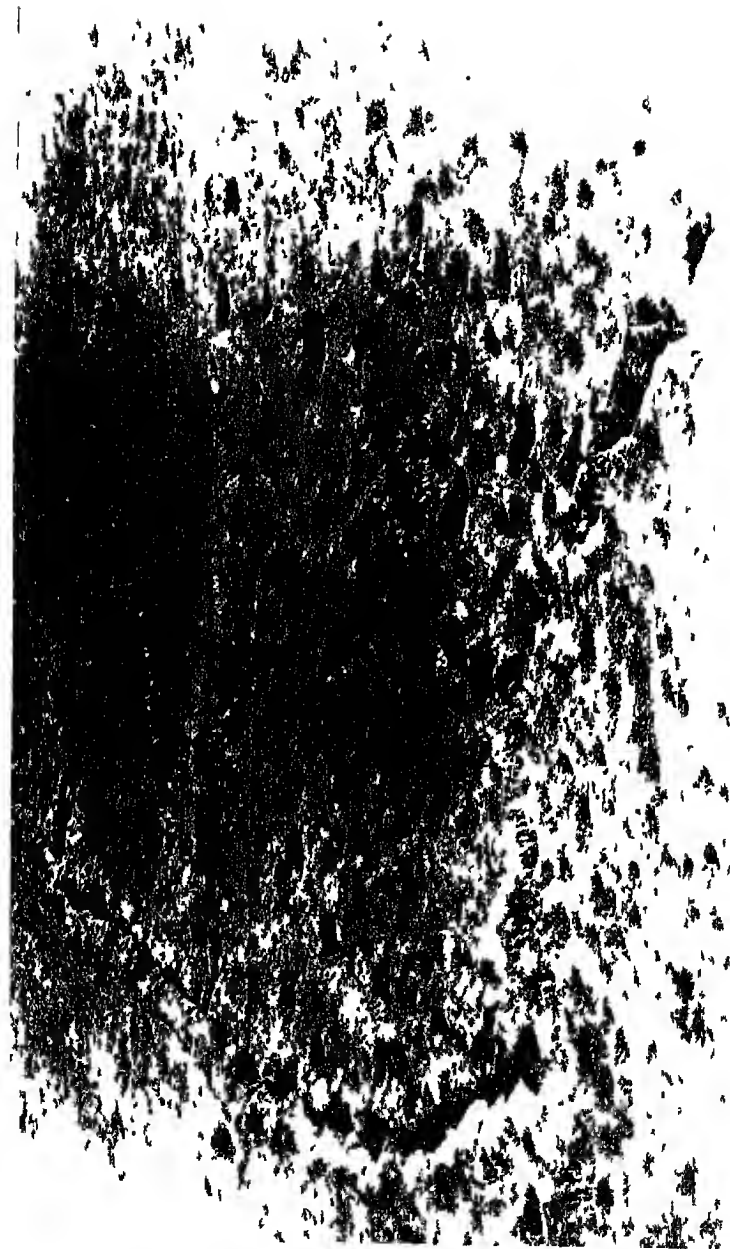
Information gathered from prisoners was beginning to come in. It confirmed and amplified reports collected by the Intelligence before the battle concerning the astonishing underground work done by the Germans.

It seemed that, starting from within fifty yards of their own support trenches, the enemy had constructed subterranean galleries extending three kilometres to the rear, lit and ventilated by electricity. They gave access to innumerable chambers and headquarters. Power was provided by a cable extending all the way from Laon. It was amazing that all this work should have escaped notice.

It was startling to remember that the G.Q.G. had of late stoutly maintained that the enemy had abandoned digging deep dug-outs and discontinued the construction of elaborate underground workings. The basis of this contention was an order on which the G.Q.G. laid great store. This purported to have been issued by the German Commander-in-Chief. Not only did it forbid work on deep shelters but ordered the sealing up of existing ones, stating that they tended to decrease the offensive spirit. Whether this order was genuine and dealt with special conditions, or whether it was the invention of an agent, I never knew.

When I left the battle area it was engulfed in darkness and falling snow. On the German side great bouquets of blood-red flowers grew and fell slowly with exasperating regularity. The enemy infantry, in perfect co-ordination with their guns, were notifying them that they should lengthen their fire.

Near where I found a car, I remember a camp-fire round which a few men sat smoking in silence. Some were puffing away as if in a suppressed rage. Others had the blank faces and staring eyes of extreme fatigue. One man with keen features, every line of which expressed that acute intelligence so characteristic of one type of intellectual Frenchman, sat hunched up, his whole attitude denoting such dejection and despair as I had seldom seen, even amongst prisoners. By this group, occupying one whole side of the fire, lay a German whose foot was a lacerated mass of flesh and leather. His face, unshaven for weeks, was drawn with pain. I vaguely wondered how he came to be there.



THE BATTLEFIELD OF THE AISNE



Presently we were held up by one of the eternal traffic blocks. Looking back towards the Aisne, I could see sudden flares of light and hear the sound of distant explosions which seemed to indicate a recrudescence of fighting. Guns would suddenly rumble as if endeavouring to fill the depressing immensity of what seemed stillness after the din of the day. Now and then a machine-gun rattled and was answered by others; the sound of rifle-shots in the distance pin-pricked the silence irregularly, sounding more violent and angry than the implacable machine-guns.

It was easy to conjure up a picture of what was going on over there in the night full of living shadows, each one separated from the world of shadows only by a sharp pang of pain from a bullet in head or heart, or by the few minutes' or hours' agony of a fatal wound.

In a fraction of the time it took a runner to bring back news to his captain of where his section was still holding out on the slopes below Craonne or Ailles, reports of the battle were flashed all over the world.

Clubmen in New York and London, the former having finished lunch and the latter dinner, cigar in hand, were reading reports hammered out on the tape. Many a man three thousand miles away knew more of what had occurred that day than the regimental commander on the battlefield. What they heard was as usual conflicting and contradictory, but there was an unmistakable ring of triumph in the German *communiqué*, of exultation and relief in the rather hysterical reports sent out by the great wireless station of Nauen. The enemy, desperately anxious that the world should know his armies had held firm, was grossly exaggerating what was in fact a great success.

Side by side with the German *communiqué* was the French one, stating that their armies had attacked and met with fierce resistance, but that the first German position between Soissons and Craonne had been captured (this if approximately true at midday was hardly the fact in the evening) and that ten thousand prisoners had been captured, which was no exaggeration.

There was one solitary traveller to whom the news of the battle meant more perhaps than to any of the millions who, interested or indifferent, suddenly heard that a great offensive had begun.

An old man sitting hunched up in the cabin of a great ship, a rug



over his knees, had been waiting all day for the report he knew must be received at any moment.

Marshal Joffre, on the auxiliary cruiser *Lorraine II*, now a day's sailing from the French coast, was on his way to the United States together with Monsieur Viviani, a former Prime Minister. The French Government hoped that the soldier's prestige, combined with the politician's eloquence, might establish on broad lines and in the sense desired by the French a basis of co-operation between the American forces and the Allied armies.

There was something that savoured of intrigue in the expedition, for the French Government hoped their mission would, by stealing a march on us, win the Franco-British competition for first call on the American contingents. Joffre knew nothing of these machinations, and when he heard of them later uncompromisingly set his face against them, for he placed loyal co-operation between French and English above all other considerations. Had he had his way there would have been no competition, cabals or acrimonious discussion concerning this most thorny problem, and it would have been settled on commonsense grounds.

But the die was cast, the French had made the first move in the game of political spillikins, and the British, hearing of it betimes, were packing off Mr. Balfour to the American front in a faster boat than the *Lorraine II*.

The Marshal had not been on deck since he had cast a last look at the coast of his country as the great ship bore out to sea. There was nothing unusual in this, but, although he was never sea-sick, it was not merely a traveller's precaution that kept him confined to his cabin on this occasion. Those who accompanied him tell us that ever since on the previous day he had gone down the companion with heavy tread, he had been overcome with an immense sense of fatigue and lassitude. His shoulders, which for so long had borne without flinching one of the greatest burdens it has ever been the lot of a single man to carry, were now bent, and the stubborn reserve with which he was wont to protect himself broke down.

Those lips that never complained were unsealed by an overwhelming sense of impending calamity. He spoke to one of his officers, who has recorded the conversation.

General Nivelle had asked him to lend him the support of his authority. But what authority had he? The Government had systematically kept him in ignorance, had consistently and ruth-

lessly pushed him into the background. He recalled his recent conversation with the French Prime Minister, Monsieur Ribot; it was evident the Government disapproved of General Nivelle's plan; he knew that several of the generals who were to carry it out were openly critical; these were bad omens indeed.

The formidable old man brooded, there was a note of pain in the muffled and usually toneless voice; the stout soft body, generally erect, appeared to have collapsed.

Colonel Fabry who accompanied him wrote: 'To-day, alone in his cabin, far from his family who had known how to soothe his lacerated feelings, he no longer hid his sadness at leaving France on the eve of the day the armies he had led so recently were to assume the offensive'.

The bitterness which had accumulated for weeks rose from his heart to his lips; his fall made him suffer as would an open wound. France had not known how to cure, had not cared enough even to try to ease, the pain she had inflicted when she cast him aside. It was now eating into his heart like a canker.

From what he said it was evident that his mind, as so often happens to those who cannot banish a painful apprehension, returned again and again to the idea of the offensive, unable to set it aside. Before him on the cabin wall it may be that a picture was conjured up of the heights which Haig's and d'Esperey's men had failed to capture in 1914. Vailly, Corbény, Juvincourt and Chévrengny. Hours must pass before he had any news. Centuries earlier a prisoner in a tower on the Loire had sighed:

Orléans, Beaugency,  
Notre Dame de Cléry,  
Ah quelle tristesse, quel ennui,  
D'entendre toute la nuit  
Les heures, les heures . . .

He must also have seen Time, the enemy with whom he had so often wrestled, once more a stolen march ahead, for he said: 'Had I remained at the head of the armies the present operations would by now have attained their full development'.

In the evening the *communiqués* were brought down to him. The German one gloated over the successful resistance of the defence, announced the capture of many prisoners. He turned to the French one; the words emphasizing the stubborn resistance of the enemy were on a model well known to him, how often had similar reports

disguising lack of success been issued over his name. His expert eyes sought the essential. Not a single village was mentioned as having been captured, yet in this once wealthy and populous region villages, or rather their skeletons, were as numerous as sheaves in a cornfield at harvest time. No guns either, the enemy's artillery had evidently not been overrun; the French infantry would have a bad time next day.

The Marshal knew what it all meant; the attack had failed. Time had conquered once more. Time, aided and abetted as it had been before, as it was to be again, by the blindness and folly of men.

What Joffre thought that night no one knows, for he said nothing. It may be he felt in his heart that he would have succeeded on a more modest scale where Nivelle had failed at the very inception of his grandiose plan.

There he sat, he who had been acclaimed the saviour of western civilization. Marshal Joffre, Papa Joffre, once the idol of his troops, of his nation and of her allies, now just an old man, brooding in the cabin of a great ship forging its way through submarine-infested seas towards the land of hope, America; while behind him, on the blood-soaked fields of France, the army he had once led to victory broke its mighty waves and shattered its hopes on the same hills where had expired the great saving tide of the Marne.



## APPENDICES



## APPENDIX I

### NOTES ON THE ORGANIZATION OF THE PRINCIPAL FORMATIONS OF THE BRITISH AND FRENCH ARMIES IN 1917

#### I. THE BRITISH ARMY

The total number of British Divisions in France in the spring of 1917 was 64.

##### 1. Composition of an Infantry Division.

<i>Infantry.</i>	Divisional Headquarters 3 Brigades (each of 4 Battalions with 16 Lewis guns each) 3 Machine Gun Companies (with 16 Vickers guns each) 3 Light Trench-Mortar Batteries (with eight 3-inch Stokes guns each)
<i>Artillery</i> <sup>1</sup>	Headquarters. 2 Field Artillery Brigades (each of three 18-pounder four-gun batteries, and one 4.5 four-gun howitzer battery) 3 Medium Trench-Mortar Batteries (each of four 3-inch trench-mortars) 1 Heavy Trench-Mortar Battery (four 9.45-inch trench-mortars) 1 Divisional Ammunition Column
<i>Engineers</i>	Headquarters 3 Field Companies 1 Signal Company
<i>Pioneers</i>	1 Pioneer Battalion (with 8 Lewis guns)
<i>Machine gun Unit</i>	1 Machine Gun Company (16 Vickers guns) 3 Field Ambulances 1 Sanitary Section 1 Mobile Veterinary Section 1 Divisional train (four Horse Transport Cos. A., S., C.)

<sup>1</sup> The British, unlike the French, did not have Corps Artillery constituted as such. The artillery attached to the Corps, known as Corps Artillery, comprised such guns as were allotted to the Corps at any particular moment. The heavy artillery was allotted to the Armies, which gave the Corps such heavy guns as they needed. Sometimes the Army kept the heaviest pieces under its own control, but it also occurred that these were handed over to the Corps in a battle.

2. Composition of an Infantry Battalion (War Establishment).  
Headquarters and four Companies  
29 Officers, 903 other ranks, 16 Lewis guns,  
11 riders, 22 light draught, 9 heavy draught, 9 mules, 9 bicycles
3. Fire Power of a Division  
Rifles. Nominally over 12,000<sup>1</sup>
4. Composition of a Cavalry Division  
Three Cavalry Brigades each consisting of:  
Cavalry Brigade Headquarters  
Three Cavalry Regiments (12 Hotchkiss each)  
One Battery R.H.A. (four 13-pounders) and Section Ammunition Column  
One Signal Troop  
Machine-Gun Squadron (12 Vickers)  
Cavalry Divisional Troops  
Headquarters  
One Brigade Headquarters (R.H.A.) and Ammunition Column  
Headquarters R.H.A.  
One Battery Light Armoured Cars  
One Field Squadron  
One Signal Squadron  
One Headquarter Cavalry Divisional A.S.C.  
One Cavalry Ammunition Park  
One Cavalry Divisional Supply Column  
One Cavalry Divisional Auxiliary Horse Transport Company  
Three Cavalry Field Ambulances  
One Sanitary Section.  
Three Mobile Veterinary Sections

<sup>1</sup> Even a strong battalion did not go into action at a strength of more than 500. Rifle-strength would thus be at its maximum 6,000.

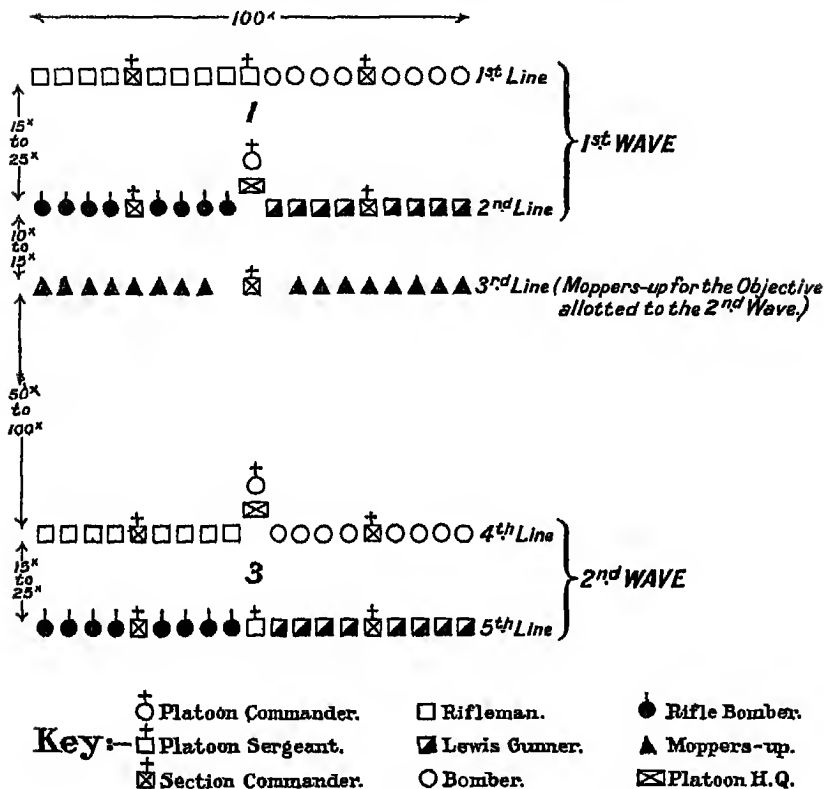


## THE PLATOON

FORMATION FOR TRENCH-TO-TRENCH ATTACK

Showing 2 Platoons in 2 Waves, with the right the outer flank.

Taking an average strength of 36 and H.Q. 4.



## NOTES

Two Platoons are depicted showing the different positions of leaders in first and second waves. The Platoon is the unit in the assault, moves in one wave of two lines and has one definite objective.

Every man is a rifleman and a bomber, and in the assault, with the exception of the No. 1 of Lewis Gun, who is armed with a revolver, fixes his bayonet. Men in rifle sections must be trained either to the Lewis Gun or Rifle Bomb. Bombing and Lewis Gun Sections are on the outer flank of Platoons.

In assembly the distance between lines and waves may conveniently be reduced to lessen the danger of rear waves being caught in enemy barrage, the distance being increased when the advance takes place.

Moppers-up follow the second line of a wave and precede the unit for which they are to mop up. If the numbers are large they must be found from a different Company or Battalion. Small numbers are preferably found from the unit for which they are to mop up. They must carry a distinctive badge and have their own command-

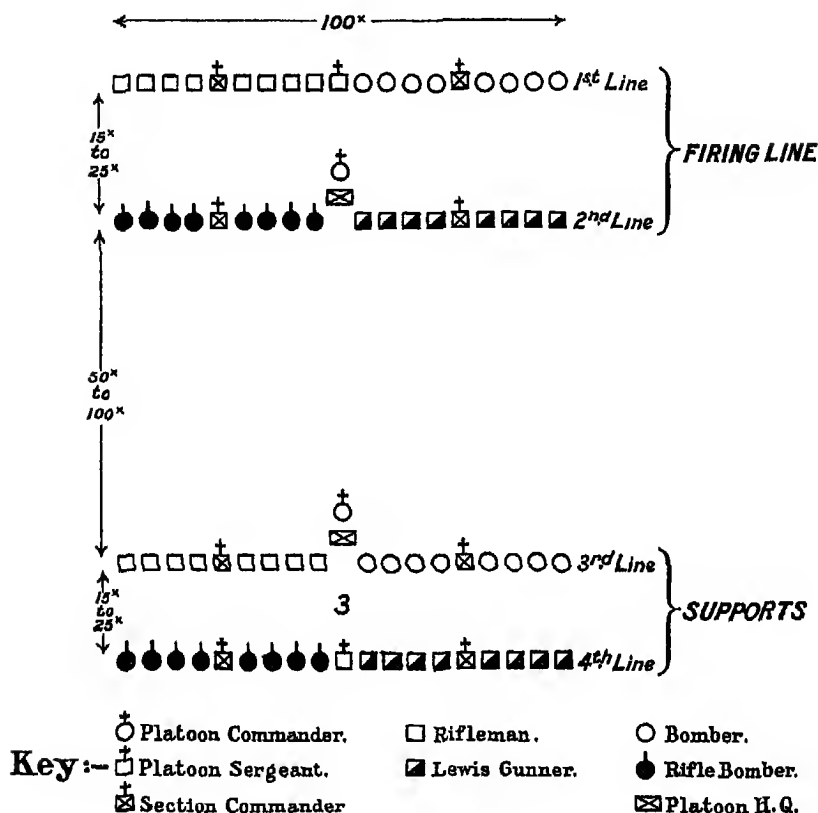
## APPENDIX I

## THE PLATOON

FORMATION FOR ATTACK IN OPEN WARFARE

Showing 2 Platoons in 2 Lines with right the outer flank.

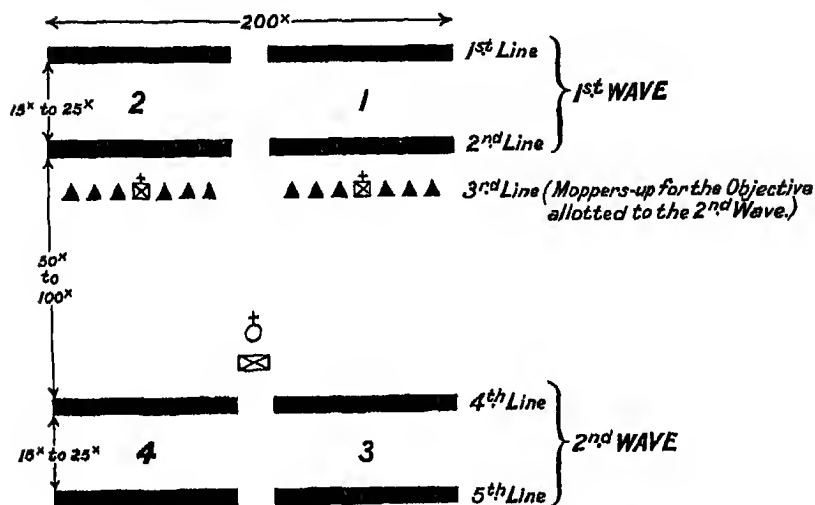
Taking an average strength of 36 and H.Q. 4.



## THE COMPANY

## FORMATION FOR TRENCH-TO-TRENCH ATTACK

Taking 4 Average strength Platoons of 36 o.r. and Coy. H.Q. 14



## NOTES

The Company moves in two waves, has two objectives and is distributed in depth. Moppers-up follow the second line of a wave and precede the unit for which they are to mop up. If the numbers are large they must be found from a different Company or Battalion. Small numbers are preferable, drawn from the unit for which they are to mop up. They must carry a distinctive badge and have their own commander.

## II. THE FRENCH ARMY

The period under review was one during which the French Army was undergoing important transformations. Divisions were being changed over from a basis of two Brigades (*type binaire*) to the *type ternaire*. This latter system consisted in the Division having all its infantry under one Commander and its artillery under another, each directly responsible to the Divisional Commander.

The difference between the two systems is shown in the following table:

<i>Type binaire</i>	<i>Type ternaire</i>
2 Brigades = 4 Infantry Regiments of 3 Battalions	1 Divisional Infantry = 3 Infantry Regiments of 3 Battalions
1 Cavalry Squadron	1 Cavalry Squadron
1 Regiment of 75's = 3 Groups each of 3 Batteries <sup>1</sup> of 4 guns = 36 guns	1 Regiment of 75's = 3 Groups each of 3 Batteries of 4 guns = 36 guns
1 Battery of Trench Artillery, 4 guns	1 Battery of Trench Artillery, 4 guns
3 Engineer Companies	3 Engineer Companies
1 Signalling Detachment	1 Signalling Detachment

At the beginning of 1917 out of 101 active Infantry Divisions in France 40 were constituted on the 'ternaire' system. (This number included 10 Divisions of recent formation which were numbered 161 to 170 inclusive.)

At the middle of January 1917, there were:

- 40 Infantry Divisions of 9 Battalions
- 40 Infantry Divisions of 12 Battalions (2 Brigades)
- 2 Infantry Divisions of 10 Battalions (2 Brigades)
- 16 Infantry Divisions of 11 Battalions (2 Brigades)
- 3 Infantry Divisions of 13 Battalions (2 Brigades)

101 Active Infantry Divisions (1,075 Battalions)  
plus 7 Territorial Infantry Divisions.

*Note*—By the middle of June, 36 further Divisions had been brought within the 'ternaire' system. Transformations were suspended from the middle of June till the middle of August.

By the end of October 10 more Divisions were included in the new system.

On the 1st November, 1917, the composition of the French Army in France was as follows:—

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes 2 batteries

- 86 Infantry Divisions of 9 Battalions
- 8 Infantry Divisions of 12 Battalions
- 5 Infantry Divisions of 11 Battalions
- 2 Infantry Divisions of 10 Battalions
- 7 Infantry Divisions of 8 Battalions

108 Active Infantry Divisions (1,001 Battalions).

Each Infantry Division included:

- Cavalry* 1 Divisional Squadron when the Division formed part of an Army Corps, half a regiment when operating independently.<sup>1</sup>
- Artillery* Three groups of Field Artillery (75's)<sup>2</sup>.  
One Battery of Trench Artillery (58's)  
Only four Divisions had a Battery of 155's (rapid-firing howitzers) although this was supposed to form an integral part of each Division.
- Engineers* 2 Company Mines  
1 Company (park)  
1 Section Projectors  
1 Section Signallers
- Medical* 2 Ambulances

#### Corps Artillery

Consisted of two groups of 75's, each of three batteries, i.e. 24 guns.<sup>3</sup>

The heavy artillery comprised a group of 120 long guns, i.e. 12 guns, and a group of 105 howitzers (12 guns).

#### Composition of a Cavalry Division:

- 3 Cavalry Brigades of 2 Regiments each
- 1 Dismounted Regiment of 3 Battalions
- 2 groups of Guns on Motors
- 1 group of Cyclists
- 1 group of 75's of 3 Batteries
- 1 Engineer and Cyclist Detachment
- 1 Detachment of Signallers

#### Composition of a Cavalry Regiment:

- 4 Squadrons
- 1 Headquarter Squadron, consisting of 2 sections of machine guns

<sup>1</sup> There were sometimes two squadrons of divisional cavalry.

<sup>2</sup> Territorial Divisions had only two groups of 90 or 95's. A group usually comprised three batteries.

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes one or two groups of 2 or 3 batteries of 90's or 95's were attached to them.

## Composition of an Infantry Regiment:

3 Battalions

1 Headquarter Company

1 gun section of 37's, attached to the 1st Machine Gun Company.<sup>1</sup>

## Composition of an Infantry Battalion:

3 Companies

1 Machine Gun company.<sup>2</sup>

## The Infantry Company in 1917:

The Company was divided into 4 identical sections. Each section was divided into 2 half sections which were organized as follows:

1st half section  
(Sergeant Bomber or Sergeant  
Rifleman)

2nd half section  
(Sergeant Rifleman)

1st Squad Bombers	2nd Squad Lewis gun teams (each team comprises 3 men)	3rd Squad Bayonet Men	4th Squad Bayonet Men
Corporal 1	Corporal 1	Corporal 1	Corporal 1
Men 7	Men 6	Riflemen 8	Riflemen 9
		Bombers 2	Bombers 2
		Rifle	Rifle
		Bombers 1	Bombers 1
—	—	—	—
8	7	12	13

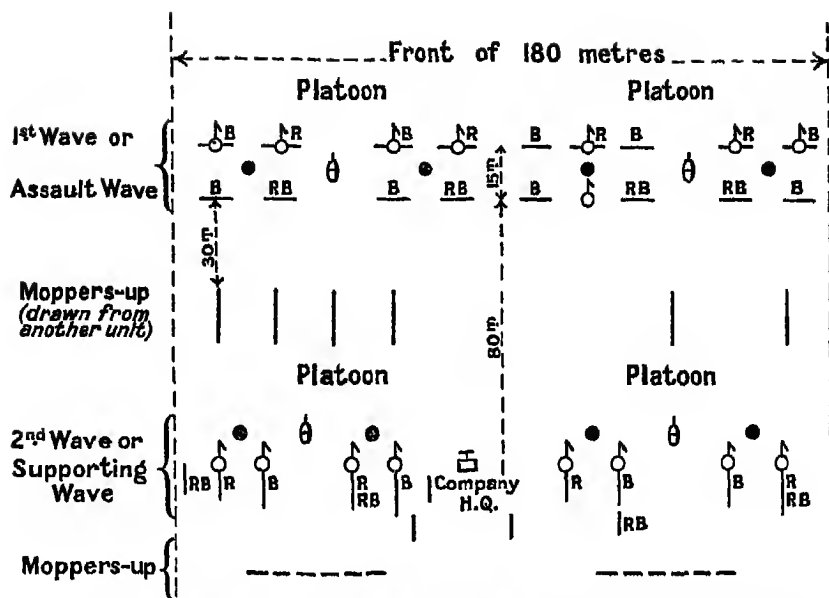
i.e. a total of approximately 40 fighting men.

At the beginning of 1917, the Infantry Company comprised eight Lewis guns (fusils-mitrailleurs).<sup>3</sup>

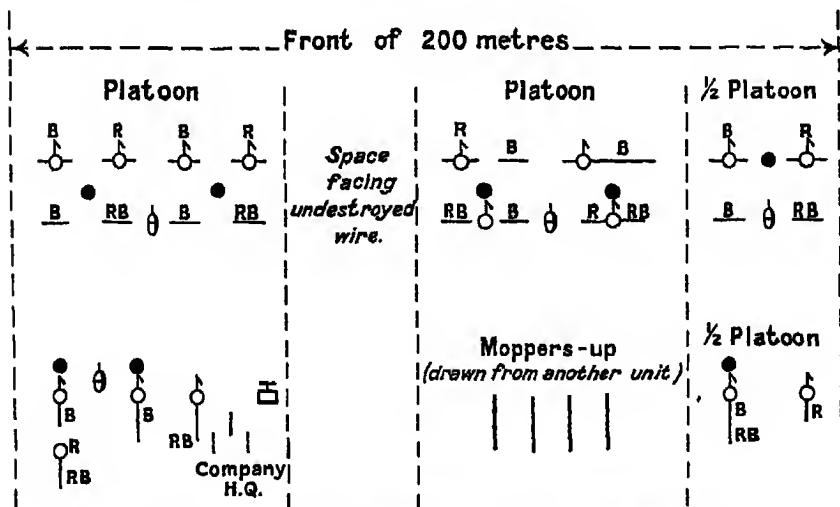
<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of 1917, there was only one platoon (three 37 mm. guns) in each regiment; at the end of 1917 each battalion was to have one section of Stokes mortars or one 37 mm. gun.

<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of 1917 the machine gun company consisted of 3 or 4 sections, i.e. 6 or 8 guns. At the end of 1917 the machine gun company consisted of 4 sections of 3 guns, i.e. 12 guns.

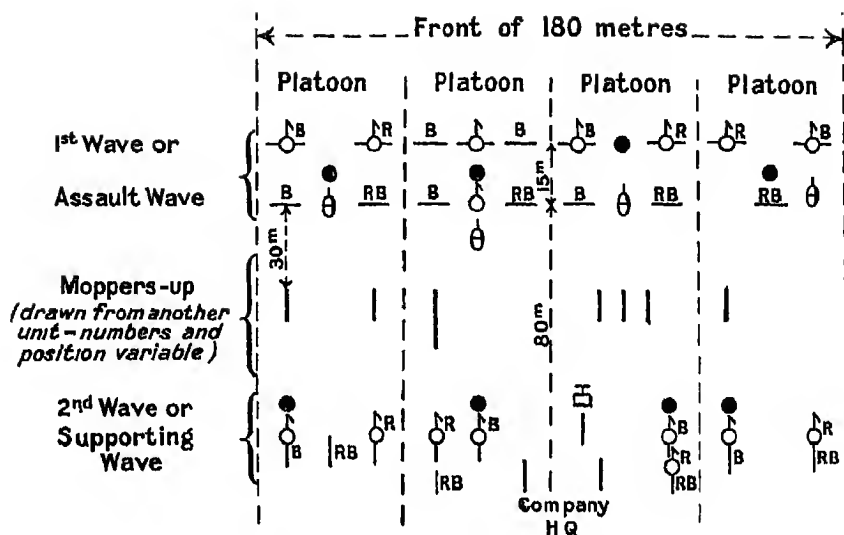
<sup>3</sup> Each 'fusil-mitrailleur' had a team of 3 men.



Example of a company in assault formation—Double column of platoons.



Example of a company in assault formation—Double column.



Example of a company in assault formation

Conventional signs relating to above and preceding plans.

□	Captain.		Drummers & Trumpeters.
⊕	Platoon Commander	B	Bomber
●	Section Commander	RB	Rifle Bomber
N C O		R	Rifleman
○	Corporal.	S	Other Soldiers



## APPENDIX II

(CHAPTER II, P. 40)

[NIVELLE TO HAIG: DECEMBER 21ST, 1916]

My dear General,

Following on our conversation of December 20th, I have the honour to explain to you, as follows, my views on the subject of our offensive in 1917 and the modifications which I think it indispensable to make in the original plan for those operations.

### *Object to be attained*

The offensive of the Franco-British Armies in 1917 must have as its object the destruction of the principal mass of the enemy forces on the Western Front. This result can only be obtained by a decisive battle, delivered by a numerically superior force against all the available forces of the enemy.

It is necessary therefore:

To pin to their front as large a part as possible of the enemy forces.

To break through the enemy's front in such a manner that the breakthrough can be immediately exploited.

To defeat all the available forces that the enemy can bring against us.

To exploit by every possible means the results of the decisive battle.

### *Necessary means*

To carry out this programme, it is essential to have available, over and above the forces necessary at the beginning of the operation to hold the enemy to his front and break through, a mass of manœuvre sufficiently powerful to attack the forces the enemy may have available.

I estimate that this mass can only be constituted by self-contained forces, assembled and trained for their task by the commanders who will lead them. It follows that these forces cannot be drawn from the armies employed in the wearing-down offensive or in breaking-through on the enemy's front.

I estimate the force necessary for this mass of manœuvre at a Group of three Armies each of three corps of three divisions.

### *General nature of the operations*

Starting from these premises, I visualise the development of the operations of our armies as follows.

The enemy forces will be held to their front in the region Arras-Bapaume and in that between the Oise and the Somme, by attacks

delivered by the armies under your command and by French forces respectively.

Meanwhile, an *attaque brusquée* delivered on another part of the front will make a break-through. This will be immediately followed by the rapid enlargement of the breach and by the concentration at that point of the armies of manœuvre which are to take part in the decisive battle.

This battle, whose results will make themselves felt along the whole length of our front, will include an exploitation on a large scale, in which the British and French Armies will participate with all their available means.

#### *Composition of the mass of manœuvre*

The success of our operations therefore depends essentially on the mass of manœuvre.

For the reasons given above (homogeneity, cohesion, training, command) I estimate that this mass ought to be distinct from the large units which will carry out the attack north of the Oise and the break-through.

Now, it is impossible for me, in view of the present division of the front between the Allied armies, to form this reserve of twenty-seven divisions.

To allow me to do this, it is essential that the British Armies should relieve a considerable number of French troops now holding the front between the Somme and the Oise, thus making available the French divisions stationed between Bouchavcsnes and the Amiens-Roye road. I estimate that this front could easily be held by seven or eight divisions, which would correspond to the German forces on that part of the front.

This relief ought to be carried out without delay, so as not to delay seriously the preparation of our forthcoming operation; I ask you therefore to see that it is carried out by January 15th at latest.

#### *Rôle of the British Armies*

To sum up, the rôle of the British Armies in our common offensive should be:

(1) To make it possible for me to constitute without delay the mass of manœuvre which is indispensable to the decisive battle.

(2) To undertake on the front of attack you contemplate an offensive on a sufficiently wide front and powerful enough to absorb an important part of the available German forces.

(3) To participate in the general exploitation which will follow the decisive battle delivered on another part of the front, by disrupting the enemy forces on your front of attack and by beginning the pursuit of the enemy in a zone which we will ultimately fix by common agreement.

In defining thus the task of the British Armies, I wish to make clear to you that I contemplate the eventual employment of my mass of man-œuvre on the right wing of your front.

Should the enemy undertake an offensive through Switzerland I would not therefore ask you to put at my disposal part of your forces to meet it.

On the other hand it is obvious that the Group of Armies of the Reserve will be operating in the general battle as much to the advantage of your Armies as of mine.

Moreover, the extension of the front which I ask of you will to a certain extent make it unnecessary for your Armies to pursue during the winter the offensive operations which they were to have undertaken in conformity with the decisions taken at the Conference of Chantilly on November 15th last.

Finally, the plan of operations which I have explained to you does not exclude the possibility, if the need arises, of an operation for the conquest of Ostend and Zeebrugge, as this could not take place before the summer.

This operation can be studied in all its details on the lines of the plan already adopted, and I even think that our Belgian allies might prepare their part in it at once.

If our great offensive succeeds, it is certain that the Belgian coast will fall into our hands as a consequence of the retreat of the German Armies, without having to be directly attacked.

If, on the other hand, our attack fails, it will always be possible when the fine weather comes to carry out the projected operations in Flanders.

In concluding this outline, I ask you to give me, as soon as possible, your answer in regard to the relief of the front between Bouchavesnes and the Roye road. The constitution of my available means, in view of the different eventualities that may arise, is a question of capital importance which I want to settle without delay.

Agréez, etc.

NIVELLE

## APPENDIX III

( CHAPTER II, P. 40 )

[ NIVELLE TO HAIG : JANUARY 2ND, 1917 ]

Monsieur le Maréchal.

You were good enough to explain to me verbally your plans for your forthcoming attacks, and I, on my side, explained my views on the employment of the Franco-British forces in France. Following on these conversations, it seems to me necessary to summarize in writing the essential points we discussed.

The attacks which our armies are to carry out on the Western Front constitute one and the same battle, to which we can therefore devote not only thirty-five divisions, as you had in mind, but approximately one hundred divisions, whose co-ordinated action should permit us to count on great results. On account of the length of front and the considerable mass of troops which, both on the enemy's side and on ours will be involved, this battle will be long-drawn-out [*d'une durée prolongée*] and will have a number of phases.

The first, in the course of which we will endeavour to immobilize the greatest possible number of enemy reserves, while obtaining tactical results which can be extensively developed.

The second, in which the principal mass of the French Armies will be engaged in order to break through the enemy's front and defeat the forces remaining at his disposal.

And finally the third, in the course of which the British and French Groups of Armies will undertake the large-scale exploitation of the success previously obtained, and will pursue the enemy armies.

The British forces should play, in the general battle, a rôle proportionate to their numbers and their strength; and the effort which will be asked of them is based on the high opinion I have of their fighting value and of the considerable part which will be due to them in the final victory.

### I

In the first phase of the battle our aims will be to contain the greatest possible number of the enemy's forces, and to obtain tactical results which can be extensively developed later.

In order to achieve the first of these aims, it is essential to attack simultaneously on wide fronts; that is why I have decided to launch an important French offensive at the same time as the attack of your Armies.

In the second place, in order that the results obtained can be usefully exploited, it is essential to penetrate the enemy's positions in depth and to have reserves available in sufficient numbers to continue the battle either immediately or when the enemy has suffered a serious reverse in another part of the line.

To sum up, the characteristics of this first phase of the battle should be as follows:

1. To attack the enemy on as wide a front as possible.
2. To envisage, in this initial attack, breaking through the enemy's front (that is, the capture of the first positions and of all artillery on the front of attack).
3. To have sufficient forces available, either to undertake the immediate exploitation, or to continue the battle so as to force the enemy to use up his reserves.

It is in this sense that I have given orders to the General commanding the G.A.N., and I think it advisable to send you a copy of these, since his Armies are next to the British Armies and his offensive is in combination with yours.

The attack of the French Armies north of the Oise will be carried out at the same time as that of your Armies; consequently the reserves the Germans can muster will be needed simultaneously in two different sectors, and both will benefit from this situation.

I feel I must allow myself to draw your attention to the necessity of avoiding dissipation of effort by allowing the attack to break up into a number of secondary actions. The forces which would be necessary for this can be replaced by powerful artillery action, and they could be usefully employed in continuing the struggle and in exploiting the success on your principal front, south of Arras.

## II

In the second phase of the battle, while the French forces are attacking at another point, the rôle of the British Armies and of the G.A.N. will be to make themselves capable of continuing their offensive. This implies the necessity of accumulating the largest possible reserves (reconstituted units or fresh troops) and preparing a decisive attack against an enemy already seriously weakened.

## III

The third phase of the battle will comprise the exploitation of the success previously obtained, and the pursuit. It is necessary, with this object, that our respective Armies should follow a combined plan.

After breaking through the enemy's front, the French Armies engaged, either in the zone of attack or on the Oise, will continue their offensive

in a northerly direction. The one, covering its eastern flank, will pursue its advance in the direction of Laon and Guise; the other in the direction of St. Quentin.

During this time, I consider that the British Armies should push on in the direction of Cambrai, covering themselves on the Scarpe facing north.

This combined manoeuvre should result in the destruction or retreat of the enemy forces on the front between Reims and Arras; its success will make possible the ultimate development of the pursuit towards the north-east and east, the British and Belgian Armies operating together north of the Sambre, and the French Armies south of that river.

Please let me know your views on these different questions and the direction and limits of your attack south of Arras, as well as the forces which you will be able to devote to it.

Agrécz, etc.

NIVELLE

## APPENDIX IV

(CHAPTER II, P. 40)

[HAIG TO NIVELLE: JANUARY 6TH, 1917]

My dear General,

I beg to acknowledge receipt of your letters No. 23139, dated the 27th December, 1916, No. 655, dated the 1st January, 1917, and No. 1005, dated the 2nd January, 1917, on the subject of the plan of operations which we have already discussed, and the proposed relief of French troops by British.

I will deal first with the plan of operations, on which the solution of all minor problems depends. It is essential that there should be no room for misunderstanding between us on this question.

In your letter of January 2nd you divide the operations into three phases.

In the first phase you propose that strong attacks shall be made by our respective Armies with the object not only of drawing in and using up the enemy's reserves, but of gaining such tactical successes as will open the way for decisive action on the fronts of attack, either immediately, or—later on—as a result of success obtained by you in the second phase. During this first phase adequate reserves are to be held ready either to exploit success immediately, or to continue to use up the enemy's reserves, according to the development of the situation.

I have already agreed to launch such an attack as you describe, but not to an indefinite continuation of the battle to use up the enemy's reserves. Such continuation might result in a prolonged struggle, like that on the Somme last year, and would be contrary to our agreement that we must seek a definite and rapid decision.

In the second phase you propose that my offensive shall be continued while you seek a decision on another front. This I have also agreed to on the definite understanding that your decisive attack will be launched within a short period—about eight to fourteen days—after the commencement of the first phase; and, further, that the second phase also will be of very short duration. You will remember that you estimated a period of 24 to 48 hours as sufficient to enable you to decide whether your decisive attack had succeeded or should be abandoned.

The third phase, as described in your letter of the 2nd January, will consist of the exploitation, by the French and British Armies, of the successes previously gained. This is, of course, on the assumption that the

previous successes have been of such magnitude as will make it reasonably certain that by following them up at once we can gain a complete victory and, at least, force the enemy to abandon the Belgian coast. On that assumption I agree also to the third phase on the general lines described in your letter.

But I must make it quite clear that my concurrence in your plan is absolutely limited by the considerations I have explained above, on which we have already agreed in our conversations on the subject. It is essential that the Belgian coast shall be cleared this summer. I hope and believe that we shall be able to effect much more than that, and within limitations of time I will co-operate to the utmost of my power in the larger plans which you have proposed.

But it must distinctly be understood between us that if I am not satisfied that this larger plan, as events develop, promises the degree of success necessary to clear the Belgian coast, then I not only cannot continue the battle but I will look to you to fulfil the undertaking you have given me verbally to relieve on the defensive front the troops I require for my northern offensive.

In short, the first two phases of the battle cannot be of *une durée prolongée*, as you suggest on the first page of your letter of the 2nd January. If these two phases are not so successful as to justify me in entering on the third phase, then I must transfer my main forces to the north. To enable me to do this in sufficient time to carry out my plans it would be necessary that the relief of the troops on the southern part of my front should be carried out by the middle of June. Moreover, to give me sufficient force to carry out the northern attack, I should ask you to take over my front up to the Ancre valley.

Thus, there is, in fact, a fourth phase of the battle to be provided for in our plans. The need to carry it out may not, and, I hope, will not, arise. But the clearance of the Belgian coast is of such importance to the British Government that it must be fully provided for before I can finally agree to your proposals.

In our conversations you have already agreed in principle to these stipulations, and I shall be obliged if you will now inform me, after fuller consideration, that you can definitely accept them.

In this connection I beg that you will give full consideration to the question of what is the greatest extent of front on which you could relieve my troops if the need should arise, and if there should be a doubt of your being able to take over as far as the Ancre I beg that the possibility of obtaining the help of Italian troops may be carefully examined.

As regards the relief of your troops on my present right, subject to our final agreement on the plan of operations I have given orders that it is to commence on January 15th, and I am arranging with the G.A.N. for a



meeting to be held with representatives of my Fourth Army on Sunday next to settle details.

I calculate that it should be possible to complete the relief as far as the Villers Bretonneux road about February 15th.

I trust that I have already made it clear to you that I cannot relieve your troops to the south of that road unless a larger number of divisions are sent to me than have so far been promised.

For my operations in co-operation with you on the Bapaume-Vimy front, I require not less than 35 divisions. On my defensive front, to the Villers Bretonneux road, I cannot do with less than 27 divisions until active operations are on the point of commencing.

This makes a total of 62, of which I have at present only 56. I expect two more from England this month and have been told that it is probable, but not certain, that I shall receive two in February and another in April, besides one Portuguese division.

No hope of any beyond these has been held out to me so far. I am again writing to the War Office on the subject.

In regard to the date of the Allied offensive, it was agreed at the last conference of Commanders-in-Chief that the Allies should be prepared to attack by the date mentioned in your letter of December 27th if circumstances should render it necessary to do so. At the same time, however, I pointed out that my Armies could not be ready to attack in full force before May 1st, and both the Russian and Italian representatives were also in favour of this later date.

It was recognized that it is of great importance that all the Allies should attack practically simultaneously and in the greatest force possible, and personally I hold that view very strongly. Circumstances may compel us to take offensive action, with such forces as can be made available, before we are all fully ready; but we must regard it as a grave disadvantage if this should occur and we must strive to avoid it. We have evidence that the enemy fears the results of combined simultaneous action by the Allies in full force. We must expect him to take steps intended to prevent such combination, and we must beware of being deceived into complying with his intentions by launching attacks prematurely on any one front, or even on all.

Yours very truly,  
D. HAIG,  
Field Marshal

## APPENDIX V

### (CHAPTER III, P. 51)

#### THE CONTROVERSY BETWEEN FRENCH AND BRITISH CONCERNING THE EXTENSION OF THE LINE BY THE BRITISH ARMY

THERE was nothing I dreaded more than the question of the extension of the line. It was a dispute of old standing and lasted as long as the war itself, causing more ill-feeling in France against England, and rousing more bitterness than any other of the many subjects of disagreement which arose from time to time between the two Governments.

I had unfortunately become familiar with every aspect of the hopeless controversy, which had been sedulously dinned into me by both sides.

The French calculated that at this time the British had rather more than thirteen men per metre of line, whereas the French only had five men per metre of their front. They held five hundred and seventy-four kilometres of line as against our one hundred and thirty-eight kilometres.

What they constantly, and perhaps very naturally, forgot in these calculations was that whereas they had several sectors where they could afford to give ground, there were none, save on the old Somme front, where the British could do so without endangering their communications with the French or the safety of the Channel Ports.

Our General Staff were always persuaded that the Germans would attack us if they possibly could, stressing the evident fact that a comparatively small success on our front would yield them advantages out of all proportion to the ground gained. They pointed out in proof of this that the enemy always maintained very large forces facing us; on the Ypres front the Germans generally maintained double the strength they had in any other part of the line. The disaster in the spring of 1918 proved the reasoning of our General Staff to have been correct. The smashing blow the enemy delivered at our over-extended Fifth Army almost led to the severance of the Franco-British forces and consequently to the loss of the war.

In 1918, although the attack on the British Fifth Army was expected, that Army was left to meet it with a strength of only one man per yard of front held, and was attacked with a strength of four to one.

If there were any doubts left on the subject, Ludendorff has laid them at rest, for he has stated that it was always his main object to defeat the

British Armies. It is now plain that the German General Staff not only never lost sight of the strategic advantage to be gained by driving back our line, but was also aware of the difficulties we laboured under owing to the varying degrees of training, that is the varying efficiency, of our units, and the dearth of trained officers.

The French, when arguing the question of lengths of line, were apt to forget that their Alsace-Lorraine sector, which represented a very large proportion of the total length of their front (130 miles out of approximately 305), was, owing to the nature of the country and the strategic situation, a purely defensive one. Here the enemy was generally reckoned to maintain only one man for every two yards of front. Nowhere else, on the long front from Switzerland to the sea, was the line anything like so weakly held.

Our allies could not understand, and for this their liaison officers must bear some blame, that a short line, with the possibility of long periods of training for our raw levies, was essential if our Armies were to represent in real strength the force they showed on paper. A recruit is less than half a soldier, a battalion without sufficient trained officers is less than the equivalent of a good company. It would have been bad economy not to give our young troops and inexperienced officers the chance of hardening up and gaining knowledge gradually, instead of allowing them to melt away, half-baked human material, in the fire of the trenches and of battle. The main trouble from the French point of view was simply this: they could see the moment coming when they would have no men left. Their casualties up to the end of 1914 had been 1,294,000 (including prisoners) whereas ours were 791,000. Nothing could mitigate this awful reality in their eyes, and there was justice in their contention that, having borne the main weight of the war until the Battle of the Somme, they were entitled to look to us to carry a larger share of the common burden than we had hitherto done. They pointed out that in a struggle in which the existence of the two countries was involved, they had been called upon to make these frightful sacrifices largely because of our unpreparedness.

These were plain if unpalatable facts, and the necessary adjustments between the baffling claims and contentions of the two Governments and the two Armies would have been difficult to make even if the utmost understanding and goodwill had always been displayed by both sides. This was unfortunately not invariably so; although on most occasions the soldiers did manage to strike a balance, the politicians of both countries were more apt to wrangle, and there were times when the dispute began to resemble a quarrel between none too honest horse-copers. The underlying obstacle to agreement between the two countries was that neither quite trusted the other to put the common cause above even national interests, and in truth neither did.

The sort of incident the Armies quoted against each other was, for instance, the fact that on February 20th, 1916, Sir Douglas Haig had declared that he would be unable to relieve the French Tenth Army for many months to come, as he had not sufficient trained troops to do so, yet on March 3rd, when the Germans attacked at Verdun and the situation became critical, the British relieved the Tenth Army with the greatest promptness and ease.

The British, on the other hand, in support of the theory that they must have sufficient reserves to deal with any emergency themselves, would recall the First Battle of Ypres where our troops had been mown down unsupported (one battalion had been reduced to eleven men before the French reinforcements appeared) while large reserves of French troops were accumulated by General Foch on the Arras front. The fact that this was due to a miscalculation of the French Command, which had expected an attack near Arras, would, it was pointed out, not have helped, had our line been broken as it very nearly was. The conclusion drawn by our Staff was that we must be strong enough at all times to hold the enemy on our front, which we could not do if we were over-extended.

It would be unfair to blame the French public for seeming to ignore or to have forgotten facts of which they were never fully aware, nor can they be held responsible for some of the tragic misunderstandings that occasionally occurred in the war. One such cruel incident comes to my mind; it occurred in 1918. Foch had sent exhausted British troops to hold a quiet sector about Reims. They were to rest and recuperate. Instead they found themselves involved in the great German attack on the Aisne and suffered very heavily, but held on grimly to one position after another. Then they were relieved. The French civilian population in the back areas, knowing only that the Germans had made a great advance, seeing these British troops taken away and fresh French troops being rushed forward, came to the conclusion that they had not held their ground, and jeered and booed at them, causing a hurt and an exasperation not easily forgotten.

The French public naturally knew nothing of these things. All it saw in the maps published by the daily papers was a line extending from the sea to Switzerland, of which the British only held a fraction; consequently it felt that a great injustice was being done the French Army. The conclusion drawn was that we were intent upon avoiding our fair share of the burden of the war. The very bitter feeling this engendered was allowed to grow unchecked; it was indeed intensified by the persistent policy of the French authorities, who did not always tell the French people the full story of our successes in the field, and certainly made no effort to make them understand the magnitude of our effort. The campaigns we were engaged upon outside Europe were generally believed by both official and

non-official Frenchmen to have been undertaken for imperialist motives.

On very many occasions I brought the subject to the attention of our authorities, who answered that they were fully aware of it and had often made representations to the G.Q.G. but in vain. The French answer to our objections was always the same; it was, they said, necessary for the sake of keeping up the morale of the nation to throw a high light on the success of their own troops. Unwilling to argue so abstruse and controversial a question, our people with a shrug of the shoulders always dropped the argument when it reached this point. Although it proved to be a waste of time I persisted in protesting until the end of the war, for I felt that not only was an injustice being done to our troops, which did not greatly matter as far as they were concerned, for they cared very little what their allies thought or knew of their achievements, but, living amongst the French, I realized this pandering to national vanity might create a state of affairs which in the end might be very detrimental to the French themselves. It proved to be so, and French indifference towards their most faithful ally grew until the day came when, pained but not surprised, I noticed on some occasion of public rejoicing at the opening of the Peace Conference that in the streets of Paris, bedecked with American flags, not a single British one could be seen. Meanwhile as a consequence of such incidents a feeling of cold aversion towards the French spread very very slowly through the British nation. It was the cumulative effect of jars such as this, of a thousand pin-pricks hardly noticed at the time, which gradually distilled a poison whose effects are noticeable to this day.

The French have only gradually realized the part we played in the war. Comprehension has come as more and more people have seen with astonishment the tablets erected in every cathedral to the million Empire dead, as an ever-growing number of travellers, tourists, and school-children have observed with reverence and awe the number and size of our cemeteries scattered over their country. To-day they know, but it has taken a long time, far far too long.

## APPENDIX VI

### (CHAPTER VII, P. III)

#### THE AMALGAME

Monsieur Abel Ferry in his book *La Guerre vue d'en bas et d'en haut*, writes concerning the *amalgame* under date November 1st, 1916.

THE *amalgame* had, during the last winter [1915] been the object of studies by General Galliéni, Minister of War.

An exchange of views had even taken place between him and Lord Kitchener. Since the death of General Galliéni the question does not seem to have been raised.

On the 1st October, 1916, it was taken up again in the press, under the signature of Polybe, and it gave rise to a courteous controversy between the *Figaro* and Colonel Repington in *The Times* of 11th October, 1916.

We could not find out to what extent the proposal had been studied.

The objections to this proposal are of three kinds.

The G.Q.G. seems to fear that the spectacle of an army more comfortable than ours would weaken the morale of our soldiers.

Further objections are the difficulty of provisioning: different rations, different equipment. This objection does not seem very strong. We have already more than thirty different types of shell; we have colonial divisions with a special diet. The adaptability of our organizers is infinite.

If the *amalgame* were done by divisions, there would be no rationing difficulty great enough to warrant renouncing the advantages of this proposal.

A third objection remains: the command.

It comes back above all to a question of *amour-propre*. Would the English agree to accept the orders of a French Generalissimo?

It is for the Government to answer.

The *amalgame* would have been possible if it had been asked for in time, when the English had only a few divisions on the French front. It is very unlikely, judging by Colonel Repington's article, that we shall get it now. In this, as in everything else, it is perhaps too late.

## APPENDIX VII

(CHAPTER VII, P. 123)

[NIVELLE TO MICHELER : FEBRUARY 13TH, 1917]

My dear friend,

I have seriously remonstrated with Mangin about his *sortie* the other day.

These misunderstandings can easily be avoided if each party will show goodwill. We are still in a period of tentative plans; it is quite natural that all parties should not speak the same language, especially, since the comparison has been made, when it is a question of amalgamating what has been called the school of the Somme with that of Verdun.

I told Mangin that I was sure you would not refuse to hear him if he had objections to make, on condition that he did not make them in a spirit of recrimination, but with the desire to convince you by arguments put forward with the necessary calm. If a difference of opinion continues, you should submit it to me.

We will talk things over frequently from now onwards. Meanwhile I ask you, in regard to the material point at issue, to give instructions which will really be Army Group instructions, defining the mission of the Armies, without entering into detail as to how it is to be carried out. I myself shall do the same. It is by visiting the different headquarters and in discussions with the executives that one can confirm or modify the orders given if this is necessary.

For the sake of morale I ask you to pass the sponge over this unfortunate incident, so that there shall be no sign of it when you see the Minister to-morrow, and in so far as this depends upon you, make certain that there shall be no repetition of it. My task is already quite heavy enough without this, and so is your own. I ask this of you, as I have asked it of Mangin, in the name of the country whose fate is at stake.

Very affectionately yours,

NIVELLE

## APPENDIX VIII

(CHAPTER VIII, P. 132)

NIVELLE'S PLAN OF OPERATIONS : JANUARY 25TH, 1917

General Nivelle's plan may be summarized as follows:

### I

(1) *Objective*

The destruction of the German forces on the Western Front, the re-occupation of the invaded provinces, and the occupation of German territory so as to be able to open peace negotiations on a satisfactory basis.

(2) *General idea*

The Allied offensive must comprise three phases.

(a) The first, in which the greatest possible number of enemy divisions will be, if not destroyed, at least pinned to their positions.

(b) The second, when a mass of manœuvre will enter into play with the object of 'manœuvring' the enemy forces previously held to their positions and of beating the remaining hostile forces.

(c) The third, the pursuit during which the remaining enemy forces will be finally disorganized and the strategic objectives attained.

(3) *Special idea*

Once the enemy front is broken, all speed and all energy must be concentrated upon exploiting the success.

The combined effort of the British and French Armies cannot obtain its maximum result unless the direction of their attacks brings them into a zone where they can use to the full their numerical superiority in pursuit of the beaten enemy.

The region between Cambrai and the Oise fulfils these conditions.

To this effect the British will attack in the direction of Cambrai, and the G.A.N. towards St. Quentin, with the initial object of holding the greatest possible number of hostile forces by a frontal battle.

This phase to be followed by the attack northwards of the main Group of French Armies on the Aisne.

(4) *Spacing of the attacks in time and place*

These different attacks form part of one battle, during which the British and French Armies will in turn work on each other's behalf.

This is not only the case in the second and third phases, but also in the first, during which the necessity of holding the enemy and forcing him



to divide his forces has caused the attacks to be planned to take place in three different areas, sufficiently far apart from each other, and also echeloned in time.

This method has the advantage of being different from the attacks conducted in 1915 and 1916.

The attacks of the British and of the G.A.N. must take place before that of the G.A.R., so that this latter shall at the beginning only meet with a minimum resistance and be able to progress rapidly in the enemy's rear.

But there must also be an interval in time between the British attack and that of the G.A.N.

The latter's offensive is closely connected with that of the main Group of French Armies; in order that the mass of manœuvre engaged beyond the Aisne shall make its action felt in the shortest possible time, it is necessary that the French First and Third Armies shall themselves have advanced far enough towards La Fère and Ham.

The British attack, more powerful than that of the G.A.N., will be launched on a particularly favourable portion of the front and will facilitate the attack between the Oise and the Avre.

The British Armies should therefore attack four or five days before the G.A.N.

## II

*Mission of the British Armies*

The British Armies will in the first phase break through the enemy's lines on as wide a front as possible, so as to hold the greatest possible number of the enemy to their positions, and advance as fast and as far as possible towards Cambrai.

In the second phase they will continue the battle and prepare for the engagement of all their forces in the third phase.

In the third phase they will in the first place reach the neighbourhood of Cambrai so as to establish connection on the Upper Scheldt with the G.A.N., which will be operating in the region of St. Quentin; they will then, together with the French and Belgian Armies, proceed to reoccupy Belgium.

In the first phase, in order to take advantage of the German salient between Arras and Bapaume, the British should carry out two simultaneous attacks, the one between the Scarpe and Ransart, the other astride the Ancre.

The northern attack should follow the axis Agny-Croisilles. It will be particularly dangerous to the enemy, and should be carried out by at least three-fifths of the divisions intended to take part in the initial offensive.

The protection of its left flank from the fire of the German guns north

## APPENDIX IX

(CHAPTER VIII, P. 134)

[BERTIER DE SAUVIGNY'S DESPATCH TO NIVELLE AND LYAUTEY: FEB. 16, 1917]

In the course of an interview I had yesterday with Lt.-Colonel Hankey (Secretary of the War Cabinet), Mr. Lloyd George came into the office where we were, and took part in our conversation for two hours.

He began by repeating what a great impression General Nivelle had made on the War Cabinet. 'For my part', he said to me, 'I have complete confidence in him, and the deepest conviction that he is the only man who is capable of bringing the operations to a successful conclusion this year. But, for this to be possible, it is necessary in the last resort that he should be able to make use of all the forces on the French front, ours as well as the French Armies.' Mr. Lloyd George is making every effort to bring his colleagues round to this point of view, but does not count on being successful, unless Nivelle and the French Government take up a strong line on the subject. 'There is no doubt that the prestige which Field Marshal Haig enjoys with the public and the British Army will make it impossible to subordinate him purely and simply to the French Command, but if the War Cabinet realises that this measure is indispensable, they will not hesitate to give Field Marshal Haig secret instructions to this effect, and, if need be, to replace him if he will not give the support of all his forces when this may be required, with complete understanding and compliance. It is essential that the two War Cabinets should be in agreement on this principle. A conference should be held as soon as possible, for although the date by which the British Armies will be ready has been retarded by a fortnight owing to the congestion of the French railways, it is nevertheless so near that we must take a decision as soon as possible. I should like, therefore, to fix this interview for February 28th.'

\* \* \* \* \*

According to E. Kuntz (*Revue d'Histoire de la Guerre Mondiale*, January, 1939) Bertier de Sauvigny sent the following telegram to the Minister of War, after a further conversation with Mr. Lloyd George, on February 19th.

The War Cabinet intends to unmask its batteries against Haig's plans. Proposals will be made by Mr. Balfour for February 28th.

It is probable though not certain that Lyautey saw this telegram. If he did, it would appear from his attitude at Calais that, while welcoming any development serving to bring about unity of command, he considered any dispute there might be between Sir Douglas Haig and Mr. Lloyd George entirely outside his province, and to be entirely ignored by him.

## APPENDIX X

(CHAPTER X, P. 160)

[NIVELLE TO HAIG : FEBRUARY 27TH, 1917]

Monsieur le Maréchal,

In execution of the decisions of the Convention of Feb. 27, 1917, I have the honour to bring to your knowledge the following facts:

1. *Plan of Operations.* I confirm the general offensive plan to be carried out in 1917 by the Franco-British Armies, which is the one I have already explained to you; its immediately essential points as far as you are concerned are as follows :

a. The first objective of the British Army is Cambrai.

b. The date on which your Armies should be ready to launch their attacks is April 8th (date for the infantry assault).

Accordingly, I should be grateful to you if you would communicate to me as soon as possible the orders which you have given to your Army Commanders, as well as the steps taken by the latter to carry out your orders.

In case it may be expedient, on account of the attitude of the enemy in Picardy or in Artois, to modify the orders given or the distribution of forces amongst the Armies concerned, I should be much obliged if you would inform me how you envisage the problem.

2. *Transport.* I confirm that the maximum means of transport which can be allotted to your Armies is that which was indicated by General Raguenau at the conference of Feb. 27th.

It will be necessary for you, in consequence, to make the needs of your Armies conform to the resources you will have allotted to you, so that your offensive can be carried out in the given conditions on the date fixed.

I must, in this connection, repeat that these resources, although below what you have asked for, are very greatly superior to those which, other things being equal, I am allocating to the French Armies of attack.

The share of the British Army, not only of rolling stock but of personnel for construction and organization, should be progressively increased so as to allow the withdrawal by successive stages of the corresponding French personnel, and so that at all events the British Army will be able to fulfil from its own resources its transport needs beyond the Lille-Maubeuge line.

3. *Organization of the British Mission at my H.Q.* As I told you verbally, and as was expressly understood at the last session of the Calais Confer-

ence, I consider it indispensable to give this Mission without delay the importance and the means of action suited to the rôle it must now play.

I ask you therefore to put General Wilson at the head of this Mission as soon as he returns from Russia.

Meanwhile until he can take up his functions, I should be obliged if you would temporarily send me General Davidson [Major General, Operations] unless you consider his presence at your headquarters to be indispensable, in which case I would ask you to designate another staff officer capable of doing the work for the time being.

I request you further to put at the disposal of the Head of the Mission:

a. General Clive, who will be required to deal specially with Operations questions.

b. A General Officer qualified to maintain permanent liaison between the French D.A. [*Direction de l'Arrière*] and your corresponding services [Quartermaster General and Director of Transport].

c. As many liaison officers under the above-mentioned staff officers as the Head of the Mission may consider necessary.

R. NIVELLE

## APPENDIX XI

(CHAPTER X, P. 163)

[HAIG TO ROBERTSON: MARCH 3RD, 1917]

Since my return from the Calais Conference, information has continued to reach me to the effect that the enemy's retirement on the Ancre may be the commencement of a withdrawal on a larger scale — probably in connection with a carefully thought-out offensive scheme.

I attach a paper summarizing some of the possibilities of the situation, with special reference to the danger of an attack designed to turn my left flank and sever my communications with the northern Channel Ports.

If, as is probable, the enemy contemplates a desperate effort to retrieve his situation and snatch victory at the eleventh hour, such an attack is not unlikely to appeal to him. The brunt of it would fall in the first instance on the British Armies and on the Belgians covering the left of those armies. Our positions in that area are notoriously difficult to hold against a determined attack by superior numbers, and even if successfully maintained against frontal attack their security might be compromised by the Belgians on our left giving way.

In face of this, as well as of the various other possibilities of the situation, the primary question for decision is whether the intended Allied offensive is to be launched as soon as possible in the belief that the enemy may thereby be deprived of the initiative and turned from his purpose.

We must assume that the enemy will have weighed the chances of this danger and will have designed measures to deal with it. If so, and if his measures prove adequate, the possible gravity of the resulting situation will be evident to you.

In the attached paper I have outlined the possibilities of such a situation, with special reference to my left flank if the enemy should select the area between Lille and the sea for his decisive effort, and if his blow should fall when the Allies had already massed their forces for, and committed them to, an offensive.

There are of course various other courses of action open. The enemy has made many mistakes and miscalculations in the past. He may fail to restore the waning confidence of his troops. And his plans may miscarry, as they have done more than once already. But before embarking on a course of action it is necessary to weigh carefully the full risks involved and to be prepared to meet them.

Heretofore, the necessary power and responsibility having been en-

trusted to me, I have been enabled to take such measures as I deemed to be required for the security of my front; and I have not found it necessary to point out risks which it lay with me to consider and guard against. Under the altered conditions resulting from the recent decision of the War Cabinet I have to consider the possibility of finding myself no longer free to deal adequately with such an emergency as I have pointed out — an emergency which is certainly within the possibilities of the situation.

I therefore deem it necessary to report, under the provisions of Paragraph Thrice of the Agreement recently signed at Calais, the steps I propose to take to minimize so far as I can the possible dangers of the situation, and my reasons therefor. These steps will unavoidably affect my offensive preparations.

As I have only just completed my study of the changes in the general situation which may result from the enemy's recent action I have not yet been able to ascertain General Nivelle's views. I am therefore unable to say how he regards the questions raised in the attached paper (of which I am sending him a copy) or whether factors affecting British more immediately and directly than French interests will carry so much relative importance in his judgment as they necessarily do in mine.

D. HARG,

Field Marshal  
Commanding-in-Chief  
British Armies in France

## APPENDIX XII

### (CHAPTER X, P. 163)

REVIEW OF THE PRESENT SITUATION ON THE WESTERN FRONT, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE GERMAN WITHDRAWAL ON THE ANCRE: MARCH 2ND, 1917

THE withdrawal of the enemy on the Ancre points to possible changes in the general situation which require careful consideration. This withdrawal may be a first step in a more considerable rearward movement on a much wider front; evidence in favour of this view grows stronger daily.

By taking a line running from the neighbourhood of Arras — or possibly from the outskirts of the Lille defences — by St. Quentin, La Fère and Laon, and thence southwards, the enemy would shorten his front by many miles, thereby setting free several divisions for offensive purposes.

We have information that such a line (known as the 'Hindenburg' Line) has already been prepared, at any rate on a considerable portion of the front named, and that the enemy has had very large numbers of men working on it for some weeks past. Evidence that further work is being pushed on continues to reach me, and we have had previous experience of the rapidity with which the Germans are capable of completing strong defensive lines. A close study of the possibilities to which present indications point leads to the following conclusions:

#### (a) *Probability of a German offensive*

The Germans are whole-hearted believers in the principle that an offensive on the greatest possible scale, driven home with the utmost rapidity, violence and determination, is the only method of forcing a quick decision.

From what we know of the internal state of Germany, it is reasonable to expect that she will do her utmost to force a decision as soon as possible in whatever way seems most likely to promise a German success. It is also to be noted that in a recently captured order signed by Hindenburg the necessity to restore the waning spirit of the German infantry is emphasized. There is no method of doing this so effective as preparation for the execution of an offensive in great numbers and under conditions considered to be favourable.

#### (b) *The probable method of applying the above principles which seems likely to be adopted by the Germans*

It is to be expected that the enemy would put the greatest possible force into his offensive on whatever front he selects for it, and that elsewhere

he would limit his action to gaining sufficient time for this offensive to reach a decision. He would seek to shorten that time both by employing the greatest possible force and by the violence of his attack; while the measures to be taken on his defensive fronts would be very carefully calculated and thoroughly prepared — economy of force on those fronts being of great importance to the success of his plan.

In deciding on the means to employ to delay any decision sought for by the Allies on his defensive fronts, while himself endeavouring to force one elsewhere, the enemy would doubtless be glad to rely on some less costly and less exhausting method than he employed on the Somme.

By creating a strong system of defence at some distance in rear of his existing line and by fighting rearguard actions in the intervening space, gradually falling back on the prepared system behind, considerable time might be gained without great loss. The action which the enemy appears to be taking now points to an intention to act on this principle. If that be his intention, the offensive preparations already made by the Allies on the Western Front might be rendered entirely nugatory. Their attack when launched, at any rate on a considerable portion of the offensive front, would become little more than a blow in the air. They would be compelled to push back the enemy's rearguards, under conditions for which he would be fully prepared, until they reached his main line of defence behind, when fresh preparations for attack would have to be made, entailing considerable delay.

Such a scheme of defence, followed by a counter-attack, or in combination with a great offensive elsewhere, would be entirely in accordance with sound principles and with the enemy's usual methods.

(c) *The enemy's choice of front for an offensive*

We may suppose that the enemy would consider the prospects of a tactical success to be greater on the Russian than on the Western Front, but strategically it would be difficult to turn such success to full account on the Russian front unless the internal state of Russia is judged to be such that considerable German tactical success would lead to her immediate collapse.

On the Western Front these conditions would seem to be reversed. Tactical success would be harder to gain, but if gained on a great scale the strategical results to be expected would probably be more rapid and more decisive.

In addition to these considerations the enemy cannot overlook the great efforts required last year to hold the Allied offensive on the Western Front, and he would probably calculate on finding it easier and less costly to hold a Russian offensive in check.

In short the weight of argument seems to be in favour of the Western



Front being selected for a German offensive rather than the Eastern or any other front.

(d) *Choice of time*

The prospects of a decisive tactical success for the Germans, on the Western Front, would undoubtedly be greatest if their attack were launched at a moment when the reserves of the French and British Armies had already been committed to an offensive on some other portion of the front—always provided the Allied attack could be held in check until the German attack had gained a decision. Success under such conditions would depend very much:

- (i) On the relative value of the troops opposing the German attack on the one hand and the Allied attack on the other.
- (ii) On the completeness and strength of the preparations made on the respective defensive fronts.

So far as preparations go, we must calculate on the Germans having omitted no precaution—offensive or defensive—necessary to give their plans the best chance of success. We may feel assured that all possibilities will have been carefully considered, and that, having once entered on the execution of his plan, the enemy will see it through with the utmost determination to success or failure.

(e) *Assuming the German attack to be on the Western Front, which part of it is most likely to be chosen*

We have no certain indications as yet on this point; but there can be no doubt that an attack between Lille and the sea presents many and great attractions to the enemy, and rumours and warnings of an intended German offensive, on a great scale, in that area, continue to reach me.

In my opinion there is no part of the Western Front more likely—probably none so likely—to be selected by the enemy for an attempt to snatch victory at the last moment by a great and decisive effort.

The Ypres sector is difficult to defend and its security depends very much on the staunchness of the Belgian troops on my left, over whose arrangements and dispositions I have no control.

A considerable tactical success by the Germans in this area, especially at a moment when my reserves, or a considerable portion of them, were already committed elsewhere, might have the most serious consequences. It would turn my left flank and threaten to cut me off within a few days from the three ports in northern France on which I rely for a considerable proportion of my requirements. The value to the enemy of these ports—especially as against Great Britain—would be enormous and the whole enterprise would fit in admirably, from the enemy's point of view, with his schemes of submarine warfare.

The Ypres sector has always been a source of special anxiety to the British Commander-in-Chief, and recent events have added considerably to these anxieties.

My centre of gravity has been shifted southwards by the extension of my line recently ordered and now completed. The railways on which I should be so dependent in an emergency are not under my control and it has become evident that I can place no reliance on them. By the recent decision of the War Cabinet at the Calais Conference I may find myself deprived of the disposal of my reserves at the critical moment, and even as regards the general disposition of my troops on the British front during the preparatory period my hands have been tied to some extent.

(f) *General summary of the situation and deductions*

It cannot be doubted that the enemy is preparing for an effort this year on the greatest possible scale.

Whether it be his final effort or not, it will certainly be impressed on his men that the result of the war depends greatly on its success — that if it is pushed home regardless of loss it will succeed — and that if it succeeds Germany will be completely victorious.

With the help of his new divisions and of economy of force on his defensive fronts, the enemy can undoubtedly mass very large forces for an offensive. His excellent system of defence, and the growing probability that he has arranged to gain time by evading the weight of an Allied blow, may enable him to carry through his offensive to a definite decision before the Allied attack has gained on. In the circumstances we cannot doubt that the enemy will have weighed all the possibilities, calculated time conditions, and made thorough and timely preparations to carry out his plan whatever it may be, regardless of our action.

It was thus that he acted in August 1914, and the French counter-offensive did not cause him to diverge for a moment from his purpose.

Are we justified in relying on the proposed Allied attack thus turning him from his purpose, whatever that may be, before he has carried it through to success or failure?

In my opinion the information so far available does not justify a final decision now on this point. We are not reliably informed as to how far the enemy's preparations for further withdrawal — if intended — have been completed, though there is some reason to suspect that they may be further advanced than appears from reconnaissance. It may be the same with his preparations for an offensive.

An acceleration of the intended Allied offensive is, I understand, possible for the French. If an attack can be delivered by them at an early date, it might fall on the enemy before he is ready for it and upset his plans. There is no certainty of this however, and my power of combining with such an attack in the near future would be very limited, my preparations

having been considerably delayed by various circumstances beyond my control.

If there is to be no acceleration of the Allied attack the situation will be clearer before the time arrives for it to be launched, and judgment can be postponed for the present.

Meanwhile, on the present indications, I consider that the safety of the British Armies might be gravely endangered if I were to commit my forces beyond recall to any enterprise which would deprive me of the power to meet developments which appear to me possible, and perhaps even probable.

For these reasons I consider that until the enemy's intentions become clearer sufficient reserves must be retained in my own hands, and especially in the Second Army area, to meet whatever action it is reasonably possible for the enemy to take. I also consider it necessary to divert to the Second Army area the labour required to repair and develop the successive lines of defence behind my lines (for the maintenance of which no labour has been available for some time) and to repair roads and develop railway construction already planned.

The steps taken in the above directions must be reduced to the minimum considered essential for the time being, and the offensive preparations already in hand will be pushed on to the utmost extent of the resources remaining at my disposal.

But some reduction in the scale of my preparations, or extra time to complete them, will, I fear, be unavoidable; and if the situation develops unfavourably for the proposed offensive it may become necessary to abandon it.

D. HAIG,

Field Marshal  
Commanding-in-Chief  
British Armies in France

## APPENDIX XIII

(CHAPTER X, P. 166)

[HAIG TO ROBERTSON: MARCH 4TH, 1917]

I beg to forward herewith for the information of the War Cabinet a copy of a letter received from General Nivelle and of my reply thereto.

If the situation continues to develop on the present lines, I intend to transfer reinforcements to my left (Second) Army at a very early stage. Arrangements to transfer labour to that area are already in hand.

D. HAIG,  
Field Marshal  
Commanding-in-Chief  
British Armies in France

## APPENDIX XIV

(CHAPTER X, P. 166)

[HAIG TO NIVELLE: MARCH 4TH, 1917]

My dear General,

I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of your letter No. 25250, dated the 27th February, 1917.

I have been engaged during the last few days in studying the possibilities arising out of the enemy's withdrawal on my Fifth Army front combined with the indications that he may intend to fall back to the 'Hindenburg Line'.

I have delayed answering your letter until I had completed this study and I now forward a paper embodying my views on the general situation likely to be created by such a withdrawal, and its possible effect on the British Armies in particular. This paper I have forwarded to General Robertson for the consideration of the British War Cabinet.

For the reasons explained in it I consider it necessary to take certain precautions at once on the front of my Second Army and to make immediate preparations for a rapid transfer of more considerable forces from my Fifth Army to the north, if the situation should require it.

Although it is not yet certain that the enemy intends to withdraw to the Hindenburg Line he has already gone back so far on the front of General Gough's Army, and there is so little room for doubt that he intends to retire still further there, that the plans I had made for an attack on that front, in combination with the general scheme as already arranged, are no longer applicable.

It appears that General Gough is now opposed only by rearguards, working on a carefully organized and fully prepared scheme of retirement. Consequently, to continue offensive operations now on a large scale in that area would merely be to conform with the enemy's plan and to use up forces which may presently be very urgently required elsewhere.

An immediate alteration in the plan of offence previously arranged is therefore necessitated so far as my Fifth Army is concerned.

I am however considering the possibility of local operations in the near future, with limited forces, designed to add to the difficulties of the enemy's retirement from the Bapaume—Monchy-au-Bois line and to enable me to gain observation over country to the north of that line.

I will inform you in due course of the results of my investigations into this question.

I see no reason at present to make any serious alteration in the original plans for an attack by my Third and First Armies, though some modifications in the details of this attack may be required. I have arranged to spend the next three days in an examination of the problem on the ground, and will inform you of the results of this as soon as possible.

An isolated attack by these two Armies, with the forces available, could, however, have no more than a local effect, and the action to be taken eventually on their front must depend on the general plan. While awaiting information from you, therefore, as to what alterations you may consider necessary in the original plan of offensive on the French front, and as to how this offensive can be most effectively supported by the action of my First and Third Armies, I will push on as rapidly as possible with my preparations on the Arras—Vimy Ridge front. Under the altered conditions it is of course doubtful whether Cambrai will prove to be a feasible objective for my Armies. It is also becoming very doubtful, owing to numerous causes of delay beyond my control of which you are aware, how far preparations on my First and Third Army fronts can be completed by the 8th April. At present I can see little hope of their completion by that date.

As regards transportation :

I note with regret that you do not find it possible to meet my requirements. In the circumstances I have no option but to do the best I can with the means provided.

I do not propose to enter into a comparison between the needs of the French and British Armies. Even if there be an appreciable difference between them, which is not borne out by such information as reaches me, comparisons at this stage of the campaign can serve no useful purpose. In such matters there have always been differences of opinion in different countries.

As regards the last sentence of the second paragraph of your letter, dealing with this subject of transportation, I understand that the arrangements for transport beyond the line Lille-Maubeuge were referred by the Committee held at Calais on the 27th ultimo to a meeting in Paris to be held yesterday with a view to a subsequent conference with the Belgians.

As regards the composition of the proposed British Mission at your Headquarters, I have been instructed to submit the names of the officers I propose to select to the British War Office in the first instance. On the general question of this Mission I would point out that the proposal has, so far, been discussed between us very briefly and generally. Before such a Mission is formed I consider it essential that the duties and responsibilities to be allotted to it should be clearly defined in writing and I should be glad to have a statement of your views on these points.

So far as I am personally concerned, my relations with General des

Vallières, the Head of the French Mission at my Headquarters, have always been most cordial and satisfactory, and I am far from being convinced that any advantage will be gained by duplicating the existing arrangements.

Yours very truly,

D. HAIG,

Field Marshal

## APPENDIX XV

(CHAPTER X, P. 169)

[DES VALLIÈRES TO NIVELLE: MARCH 5TH, 1917]

I have the honour to report to you that in the course of an interview I had with him, Marshal Haig expressed himself as follows:

Several *new facts* have arisen which *modify seriously* the conception of the Anglo-French offensive for 1917.

1. The systematic *retreat* of the Germans on the front of the British Fifth Army.

2. The threat of a great German offensive through Belgium where a considerable assemblage of troops is notified.

Marshal Haig concludes that it would be to play the Germans' own game to follow them into the devastated territory they have voluntarily abandoned. In his opinion, it is evident that the enemy is seeking to entice and to *fix* in a certain direction *the mass* of the Anglo-French forces, and to take advantage of the moment when they will no longer be available, to launch a *decisive* offensive against *another and depleted* part of the front.

The numerous divisions which the Germans have recently formed into a general reserve, will allow them to give this offensive considerable strength.

The British Higher Command is convinced (or at least pretends to be) that this offensive on a grand scale will take place on the Dunkirk-Calais-Boulogne front, which is *vital* for the British Army, and that it will complement and greatly facilitate naval action against England.

It follows that the Marshal considers it *indispensable* not only to have available *immediately* the necessary means (infantry divisions and heavy artillery) to maintain intact the British front in Belgium, but further to amass as many *fresh reserves* as he considers necessary to compensate for the retreat of the Belgian Army which he considers inevitable.

The consequence of this point of view is that the British Higher Command is seeking, from now onwards, to *constitute important reserves*, with a view to meeting this possible German offensive.

With this end in view, it plans:

- a. To maintain with the British Second Army (Belgian front) several infantry divisions and groups of heavy artillery originally destined for the attack at Arras.

- b. To withdraw from the Fifth Army (in front of which the Germans are in retreat) important reserves ready to be moved to Belgium at a moment's notice.





*Conclusions*

Marshal Haig is communicating with his War Cabinet *to obtain sanction* for his point of view, and (as appears from his memorandum) he does not hesitate to appeal to the clause of the Calais protocol, 'Marshal Haig will conform to the orders of the Commander-in-Chief except in the case where he considers they are of a nature to compromise the security of the British Army', so as by this means to avoid having to comply with the demands of the French Higher Command.

It follows that, if Marshal Haig obtains the approval of the British War Cabinet, the immediate consequences so far as the Franco-British offensive is concerned will be as follows:

1. One of the British Armies *will not take part in the battle*. Indeed after an (easy) effort against the line Bucquoy—Achiet-le-Petit—Bois-Loupard (and perhaps subsequently against the line Ablainzeville—Achiet-le-Grand—Bapaume?) the offensive of the Fifth Army is *no longer contemplated*. The British Higher Command plans to take away its reserves.

2. The British First and Third Armies will *not* carry out an offensive *à fond*. The First Army has not enough reserves to do this (moreover it is on the Douai part of the front) and the Third Army could only make a powerful effort on the *very narrow* front south of the Scarpe, where the continued retreat of the Germans in the region south-west of Arras tends still further *to diminish its extent*.

Marshal Haig is even asking himself whether the direction of Cambrai, originally assigned to his Army, continues to be appropriate?

Such doubts, and the small amount of confidence which the British Staff seems to have in the results to be expected from the British offensive in Arras, confirm me in my *personal* conviction that this attack will not be pressed with the desire to pursue it *à fond*, but with the desire to keep the available forces for Belgium.

Finally, I must note the *persistence* of the desire *to gain time*. General Kiggell, the Chief of Staff, insisted to me upon the advantage for the Allies of not attacking *prematurely*, because the Germans will *certainly* stand on the Hindenburg Line. The Field-Marshal expressed doubts as to the *possibility of being ready to attack* by April 8th. He stresses the bad state of the roads, which is certainly a fact and is aggravated by the renewed frosts.

In regard to the constitution of an important British Mission at the G.Q.G., Major Sassoon, aide-de-camp and confidant of the Marshal, tells me that the latter is determined not to accept it. He is hiding behind his War Cabinet, to whom he has submitted the names of the persons he selects, while underlining the fact that he is opposed to any change.

He says that he is perfectly satisfied with his contact with the French Higher Command, thanks to the liaison established by the Head of the French Military Mission. The latter must in truth state that, since the month of October, 1916, the Field Marshal has constantly avoided (in the most courteous and diplomatic manner possible) any important discussion concerning the operations of his Armies.

VALLIÈRES

[The whole of this despatch exemplifies how a well-meaning foreigner can be misled by the British habit of understatement.]

## APPENDIX XVI

(CHAPTER X, P. 170)

[NIVELLE TO HIAIG: MARCH 6TH, 1917]

Monsieur le Maréchal,

I have the honour to address to you herewith the *directive* I had drawn up for you to carry out, before I had received your letter No. O.A.D. 326 of the 4th March, 1917, and the copy of your note to the War Cabinet on the general situation.

1. *As regards operations*

My point of view is in general very similar to that explained in your letter, except however as regards the contingency of a German attack in Flanders, which is possible but is not more probable than on any other point of the Western Front, Champagne, Lorraine, Alsace.

The enemy reserves in Flanders and Belgium are of no more importance than those in Lorraine and Alsace, for instance:

I consider in consequence that a particular anxiety on this account is not specially justified, and that you ought to devote all your available forces, without regard to any other consideration, to your participation in the combined offensive. If you consider it necessary, pending the opening of our offensive, to take certain special precautionary measures in this region I only consent on the express condition that these dispositions will in no way interfere with the preparations for your Arras attack, and that the strength of this attack will not be reduced by a single man or gun.

As regards the railways and the transport of material, it is inadmissible that the labour and transport which are required for your zone of attack should not have absolute priority over that for the Ypres region, where their immediate utility is necessarily hypothetical. I have explained to you at length in the attached *directive* the method of employment of the troops at your disposal which I consider to be the best, and I have defined the objective of your attack at Arras as well as the date on which this attack should be ready.

2. *As regards the constitution of the British Mission attached to my Headquarters*

I must tell you that I have no thought whatever of throwing the least discredit on the very distinguished British officers who compose it; quite the contrary; I should in fact be very glad, should you decide to retain them at their posts in the new organization, and I have in particular

asked you that General Clive should be in charge of questions of Operations.

But it will not have escaped you that fresh arrangements are required to deal with the fresh situation.

I cannot dream of accepting the heavy task which has been entrusted to me in respect of the British Army unless I can have at my disposal a certain number of British staff officers speaking French well, familiar with our methods of work and capable, not only of serving as liaison officers, but also of foreseeing the problems of every kind which we shall have to settle together, and of studying their solution.

The British General Officer who will be placed at the head of this Mission must have the necessary authority and experience to fill his rôle. That is why I have asked you to have General Wilson nominated to this post; he has both during and before the war done a great deal of work with the French General Staff and for every reason he seems to me to be absolutely qualified to perform these duties. I must be allowed to insist once more on his appointment.

I consider, however, like you, that it is necessary that the duties of the Head of the British Mission at my headquarters and those of his subordinates should be clearly defined, and I will send you shortly by messenger my proposals on this subject.

3. *As regards the memorandum*

of which you have sent me a copy, I need not reply to it since it is not addressed to me. But since it is intended to be communicated to the War Cabinet I have been obliged to communicate it also to the French War Committee.

4. *As regards the question of transport*

The trains placed at the disposal of the British Army from the 1st to the 5th March show that the number agreed upon, 160 trains a day, has been exactly maintained in spite of the accident at Boulogne.

R. NIVELLE

## APPENDIX XVII

(CHAPTER X, P. 170)

[NIVELLE'S *directive* TO HAIG: MARCH 6TH, 1917]

The enemy's withdrawal on the front of the Fifth British Army constitutes a new factor in the situation, whose effect on the combined offensive of the Franco-British Armies must be examined.

At the present time the retreat of the Germans has only been carried out on the front of the British Fifth Army; it will extend perhaps as far as the region of the Somme and the Oise, but we have in any case no information on which to base the supposition that the enemy will act in the same way on the front of attack of your Third and First Armies any more than on that of the Groupe des Armées du Nord. On the contrary; the position known as the 'Hindenburg' Line is so situated that our principal attacks both in the British and in the French zones could outflank and take it in rear.

On this account the German withdrawal will, even if it becomes general, be to our advantage, and on this fact I base a first decision, which is not to make any fundamental alteration in the general plan of operations that has been drawn up; and in particular to keep to the date fixed for the opening of our attack.

It is, however, indisputable that all our operations cannot be executed in the conditions previously foreseen. I will therefore examine in succession the question of the conduct of operations on the front of the British Armies and on that of the Groupe des Armées du Nord.

### FRONT OF THE BRITISH ARMIES

(a) On account of the enemy's attitude the attack of the Fifth Army cannot develop according to your original intention.

It is of course necessary to contain in this region as many as possible of the enemy forces, but the destruction effected by the enemy in the sector evacuated by him does not allow the hope of being able to prepare in time the arrangements of every kind necessary for the execution of a serious attack against a position strongly organized and held.

On the other hand the retirement of the enemy has put fresh troops at his disposal.

In consequence I am of opinion that your Fifth Army should be given as its mission the order to continue to drive back the enemy as vigorously as possible, but that you should withdraw from it at once six infantry

divisions out of the twelve which you have given to it, as well as a considerable part of its heavy artillery.

(b) *Employment of these troops*

Out of the troops which you will thus have at your disposal I ask you to attach some heavy batteries to your Fourth Army, together with the necessary infantry, and to instruct General Rawlinson to use them on his right flank so as to co-operate effectively with the attack of the Groupe des Armées du Nord.

As regards the remainder of these troops, they should be placed in reserve in rear of your front at Arras.

Their employment may be contemplated under one or other of the two following forms:

1. You will either employ these divisions (and the available heavy artillery) wholly or in part to reinforce your attack at Arras; this will allow you to give the attack both a more extended front and greater strength;

or

- (I am only contemplating here the eventuality of your attack at Arras developing unfavourably)

2. These divisions will constitute a general reserve ready for every contingency, whether it be to meet an attack from the north, or to support or exploit the success, or on any other part of the front.

The result of this is that this general reserve must be organized as one command.

(c) *Execution of the attack at Arras*

The object of the operations of the First and Third Armies has not varied; it is still a question of breaking the enemy's front on the greatest possible width and pushing at once all your reserves beyond the breach in his line in order to gain the Cambrai region.

I cannot judge what modifications you should make in the method of execution of these attacks as a result of their reinforcement by the troops drawn from the Fifth Army, and of the possibility of immediately taking the enemy in rear if at that moment he is in occupation of the 'Hindenburg' position. But I must insist on the necessity of making the front where you intend to break through as wide as possible on both banks of the Scarpe; failing this your strategical reserve will not be in a position to intervene with advantage.

(d) *Date and preparation of the attack at Arras*

Lastly, I confirm my intention not to change the date of the commencement of our operations.

It is for this reason, and taking account of the fact that the abandonment of the offensive of your Fifth Army will allow you to devote all your resources to the preparation of your single attack, that I count on your being

able to undertake operations under the best conditions on the date fixed.

FRONT OF THE GROUPE DES ARMÉES DU NORD

I have no intention at the present moment of modifying the orders given to the Groupe des Armées du Nord, on whose front there is no material indication that the enemy has decided to retire.

If, however, this contingency should occur either before our attacks or during their preparation or execution, I intend to leave with the Groupe des Armées du Nord the forces necessary to press the enemy in this retreat and to *contain at least a part of his forces on his new front, while the remainder of the troops thus made available in the Groupe des Armées du Nord will be employed elsewhere.*

To sum up:

1. At the present time the plan of operations for 1917 in its general lines is as follows:

2. Only the attack of the British Fifth Army is abandoned. The troops thus made available (six divisions at least) must serve above all to increase the strength of the principal attack of the British Armies.

All the necessary measures must be taken in order that this attack may be made in the best conditions on the date agreed upon.

3. No modification is made at present in my plans for the offensive north of the Oise.

If the enemy should retire on this front, the troops which I should take away from the Groupe des Armées du Nord would be employed elsewhere.

R. NIVELLE



## APPENDIX XVIII

(CHAPTER X, P. 178)

[TELEGRAM FROM BRIAND TO LLOYD GEORGE: MARCH 7TH, 1917]

General Nivelle has just communicated to the French War Committee the memorandum of March 2nd addressed by Marshal Haig to General Robertson, a document which calls for the following remarks by the French War Committee.

On February 27th, immediately after the Calais Conference, General Nivelle addressed to Marshal Haig a letter which reached him the same day and in which:

1. He confirmed the plan of operations and the date of the offensives.
2. He asked him for the orders given to the British Armies.
3. He asked him for the composition of the Staff of the British Mission, whose creation had been decided upon at the second session of the Calais Conference.

Six days later, on March 4th, Marshal Haig answered by a letter in which he confined himself to indicating:

1. His point of view on the subject of the German retirement on the Ancre.
2. His hypothetical fears on the subject of a German attack in Flanders.
3. His doubts as to the utility of the Mission which is to be organized at the G.Q.G., and as to the possibility of being in a position to attack on the date agreed upon.

Attached to this note was a copy of the note addressed by him to General Robertson to be submitted to the War Cabinet.

The results of this note are:

1. A determination not to accept the decisions of the Calais Conference.
2. A tendency continually repeated to reconsider the plan of operations accepted by the Conference which was attended by the heads of the British and French Governments, provided with full powers by the two Governments and by their War Cabinets, a tendency all the more dangerous since the period of the offensives is at hand.
3. A tendency calculated to surrender the initiative in the operations, shown by praise of everything the Germans can do or plan without taking into account for one instant that we could benefit

by the same advantages. For example, the first line of paragraph (a), the first line of paragraph (b), all paragraph (d), lastly all paragraph (f), which in the last line contemplates the reduction of British co-operation and even the abandonment of the plan.

The general spirit of this document indicates tendencies opposed to the offensive.

The project attributed to the Germans of attacking in the north is possible, but does not rest on any certain foundation; numerous hypotheses of the same sort can also be made in respect of all points of the front: Reims, Soissons, Champagne, Lorraine, Alsace.

There is only one real fact, which was already known at the time of the Calais decisions, and that is the retreat on the Ancre.

General Nivelle has in consequence decided:

1. That no change need be made in the general plan of operations unless there are new developments.
2. That only the secondary attack on the Ancre, whose object has been partly attained, should be abandoned, thus making available a reserve of some six divisions, which will be left for the present at Marshal Haig's disposal.

The abandonment of this attack will enable the attack at Arras to be reinforced and will expedite the preparations for the offensive, since there is now only one front of attack to be provided with material and munitions.

Marshal Haig's repeated tendency to avoid the instructions which have been given to him, to reopen continually the question of the offensive itself and the plan of operations, and this at a time when these are on the point of being carried out, would render the co-operation of the British forces illusory and would make the exercise of a unified command impossible.

In consequence Marshal Haig should be ordered to conform, without delay, to the decisions of the Calais Conference and to the instructions given him by General Nivelle.

Further, it is necessary that General Nivelle should have at his disposal as soon as possible a qualified intermediary between himself and the British Armies, in order that he may keep himself acquainted with the possibilities of these Armies and that he may communicate his *directives* to them. The French War Committee insists that General Wilson, who has already fulfilled similar functions at the beginning of the war, be appointed to this post.

In case the War Cabinet should not see the possibility of thus remedying without delay the grave difficulties noted above, it will not be possible for the French Commander-in-Chief to ensure the unity of the operations on the Western Front, and the French Government would only be able to express its great regret at this situation.

## APPENDIX XIX

(CHAPTER X, P. 185)

[HAIG TO NIVELLE: MARCH 9TH, 1917]

My dear General,

I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of your letter No. 5050 dated 6th March, 1917, replying to my letter of the 4th March and forwarding a *directive* explaining your view of the situation and the manner in which you desire that the Armies under my command should co-operate in the general plan of offensive operations on the Western Front.

I attach hereto some remarks on points raised in your *directive*, to which I invite your consideration.

In regard to the matters dealt with in your letter:

I am in agreement with you that there are no reliable indications as yet of the enemy's intentions. At the same time, his withdrawal, even so far as it is now evident, has already increased the mobile forces at his disposal, and a continuation of the withdrawal — should such take place — will add still further to his reserves. This constitutes an important modification of the general situation which must be taken into account.

The security of the Allied line between Lille and the sea is, and always has been, of vital and immediate consequence especially to the British Armies. Since I have had the honour to command His Majesty's forces in France I have never reduced the strength of my Second Army without most careful calculation of the degree of risk incurred, and that calculation must be based on what it may be in the enemy's power to effect. This necessarily depends on the reserves at his disposal and these reserves have increased appreciably and are likely to increase further.

I trust this explanation will make my point of view quite clear to you in regard to the precautions which I consider necessary on that part of my front.

Another important factor to be taken into account is that heretofore the enemy's salient position between the Rivers Ancre and Scarpe has been equally vulnerable on the fronts of my Fifth and Third Armies. His withdrawal from the salient will have the effect of reducing the immediately vulnerable part of his front in this area to the portion just south of the Scarpe. As was to be expected, he is already strengthening considerably this important pivot in his new line, as well as the Vimy Ridge on which its defence depends to a great extent. I must count therefore on my attack meeting with even greater resistance than I had anticipated,

especially as, under the changed conditions, General Gough's Army will be able to afford but little assistance to the Third Army.

On the other hand, the altered situation will enable me to withdraw troops from my Fifth Army front; and this provides me with the means to maintain the strength of my Second Army until the enemy's intentions are clearer, and eventually, I hope, to strengthen the attacks arranged for on both banks of the River Scarpe.

I have no intention of weakening or delaying these attacks unless some change of circumstances should render this unavoidable.

I attach for your information a copy of instructions which I am issuing to my Army Commanders to-day.

In regard to the proposed British Mission at your Headquarters, I hope to receive at an early date your views as to the scope of the duties and responsibilities to be allotted to it, and when this matter has been arranged I will proceed as rapidly as possible with the selection of suitable officers, such selection to be subject to your concurrence.

Yours very truly,  
D. HAIG,  
Field Marshal

[Remarks on *directive* No. 5051, dated G.Q.G. 6th March, 1917]

- [1] 1. The enemy's withdrawal on the British front has undoubtedly modified very considerably the tactical situation to be dealt with there.

My original plan of action was, by a combined operation of my Third and Fifth Armies, to defeat the enemy in the Scarpe-Ancre salient — after which I anticipated comparatively less organized opposition to my further advance.

Under the changed situation my tactical plan, subsequent to the capture of the enemy's lines on the immediate front of attack of my Third and First Armies, must be almost entirely recast.

Strategically also the general situation is modified to the extent explained in my letter No. O.A.D. 332 of this date.

With the above exceptions, however, the general plan in its broad outlines remains as before as far as the British Armies are concerned.

2. I am in agreement that (so far as can be foreseen) my Fifth Army may be weakened as soon as the operations now in preparation on its front have been completed, i.e., after about the 16th instant.

I am as yet unable to estimate exactly what divisions and heavy batteries, etc., I may be able to withdraw from this Army.

3. The troops withdrawn from the Fifth Army, and certainly all the artillery, will be required eventually to reinforce the Third and

First Armies; although some of them may have to be held temporarily in reserve in my own hands.

I see no prospect of being able to reinforce Sir H. Rawlinson; at any rate unless I find it permissible later on to withdraw troops and guns from my Second Army, and probably not even then.

- [2] The proposed reinforcement of General Rawlinson is quite outside the original plan agreed on.

My general reserve will of course be organized in accordance with the tasks for which I may require it.

- [3] My utmost endeavours will be exerted to make the attacks I have undertaken to launch as strong as possible and to deliver them on the date named, subject always to such action by the enemy as may compel me to take special steps to ensure the safety of my Armies. From this responsibility to my King and Country, and to the officers and men placed under me, I feel that nothing can release me so long as I am entrusted with the command of His Majesty's Armies in France and Flanders.

In regard to the date of complete readiness, preparations have, as you are aware, been seriously hampered by various causes, such as insufficient railway facilities, bad weather, and delays in arrival of requirements from England, due to shipping and other difficulties. In consequence of this my preparations may not be so complete as I had hoped they would be.

With the exception of the points noted above, I trust to be able to carry out the provisions of the *directive* and will do all in my power to that end.

D. HAIG,  
Field Marshal  
Commanding-in-Chief  
British Armies in France

[NOTES BY GENERAL NIVELLE WRITTEN IN THE MARGIN OF THIS DOCUMENT.  
THE NUMBERS CORRESPOND TO THOSE IN THE MARGIN ABOVE.]

- [1] exaggerated.  
[2] The liaison to be established covers all possible plans, without its being necessary to specify them.  
[3] Take note: — to insist on the fact that, the attack once engaged, it is necessary to make it as strong as possible, without concern for other considerations, with which it is the business of the Commander-in-Chief to deal.  
[4] That responsibility is mine, since the British Government has so decided.

## APPENDIX XX

(CHAPTER XI, P. 193)

[DRAFT AGREEMENT FOR SUBMISSION AT THE LONDON CONFERENCE: MARCH 13TH, 1917]

Detailed arrangements to give effect to the Calais Conference of the 26th and 27th February, 1917, regarding the relations between the French and British Commanders-in-Chief in France.

It is agreed:

(1) That the relation between the French and British Commanders-in-Chief will, until the commencement of the battle, remain as heretofore.

(2) That except with the British Commander-in-Chief's consent the French Command is not authorized to issue instructions to or have any direct official communication with any commander, body of troops, or individual in the British Armies other than the British Commander-in-Chief with whom alone the execution of such instructions will rest.

(3) That the French Commander-in-Chief is not to inspect British troops or visit them officially without the British Commander-in-Chief's consent.

(4) That while it will be the duty of the British Commander-in-Chief to furnish all necessary information as to his plans, and copies of his orders to give effect to the operations arranged for, it is not within the right of the French Commander-in-Chief to demand copies of the orders issued by subordinates, or of the plans made within the British Armies to carry out the orders of the British Commander-in-Chief. The British Commander-in-Chief, however, will always be prepared to arrange for an exchange of orders when necessary to ensure effective co-operation.

(5) That the French Commander-in-Chief is not permitted to remove any British troops or individuals from the command of their Commander-in-Chief, but, if necessary, in order to exploit a success following the effective breaking of the enemy's line on the French front during the operations arranged for, the British Commander-in-Chief will at once comply with any demands made by the French Commander-in-Chief in respect of the use of British reserves for such exploitation, it being understood that the troops so detached will remain under the orders of the British Commander-in-Chief.

(6) While the British Commander-in-Chief has been directed to conform to General Nivelle's instructions under certain defined conditions,

it is desirable that General Nivelle should address his instructions in the form of requests to an equal and not as orders to a subordinate.

(7) That the conditions laid down in the Calais Agreement referred specifically to certain defined offensive operations and do not give the French Commander-in-Chief any right to dictate to the British Commander-in-Chief on other offensive operations or on such questions as the defence of the remainder of his front, or the measures taken and dispositions made therefor.

(8) That in case of difference of opinion the British War Cabinet reserves to itself the right to decide as to whether any given conditions fall under the terms of the Calais Conference or not.

(9) That all instructions and communications sent to Sir Douglas Haig will be signed by General Nivelle and not by a staff officer.

## APPENDIX XXI

### (CHAPTER XI, P. 196)

AGREEMENT BETWEEN FIELD MARSHAL SIR DOUGLAS HAIG AND  
GENERAL NIVELLE, ON THE APPLICATION OF THE CALAIS  
CONVENTION OF THE 27th FEBRUARY 1917

#### I

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE FRENCH AND BRITISH COMMANDERS-IN-CHIEF

The French Commander-in-Chief will only communicate with the authorities of the British Army through the intermediary of the British Commander-in-Chief. This arrangement does not apply to the relations between neighbouring Groups of Armies or Armies, nor to the carrying out of the duties of the French Mission as they are at the present time.

The French Commander-in-Chief will receive from the British Commander-in-Chief information as to his operation orders as well as all information respecting their execution.

The operation orders of subordinate units will be communicated to one another by neighbouring units in conformity with the usual custom, as required by the necessities of war.

All the British troops stationed in France remain in all circumstances under the orders of their own chiefs and of the British Commander-in-Chief. If the development of the operations should cause the French Commander-in-Chief to ask the British Commander-in-Chief to use a part of his forces for an action independent of the rest of the British Army, the British Commander-in-Chief will do his utmost to satisfy this demand. The commander of the forces thus detached may receive, as long as his independent position lasts, direct orders respecting operations from the French Higher Command.

#### II

DUTIES OF THE BRITISH MISSION ATTACHED TO THE FRENCH  
HEADQUARTERS

As before, the object of the British Mission attached to the French Headquarters is to maintain touch between the French and British Commanders-in-Chief.

The French Commander-in-Chief can employ the members of the



Mission in studying and in drawing up the instructions which are afterwards sent under his signature.

In principle, all instructions and communications sent to Sir Douglas Haig will be signed by General Nivelle. In case of absence or in an emergency, they may be signed by the Chief of Staff or by the Head of the British Mission acting by delegation of the French Commander-in-Chief.

The duties of the Head of the British Mission at the French Headquarters are as follows:

(a) *In respect to the British Commander-in-Chief*

To keep him informed of the intentions of the French Commander-in-Chief and to transmit to him his directions; to keep him informed of the situation of the French Armies and the development of their operations.

To keep him informed of the resources of every kind which the French Higher Command can place at the disposal of the British Armies, as well as of the period in which the demands of the British Higher Command can receive satisfaction.

(b) *In respect to the French Commander-in-Chief*

To keep him informed as to the general situation of the British Armies in France and as to the intentions of the Commander-in-Chief of those Armies.

To keep him informed of the orders given to the British Armies in France for the preparation and execution of the plans of operations, as well as the way in which the operations are developing.

To keep him informed in good time as to the material situation in every respect of the British Armies in France and as to their needs, in order that he may be able to satisfy the latter in so far as he is concerned.

The Head of the Mission has under his orders two General Officers charged, one with the study of questions of operations, the other with the study of questions respecting the administrative services, and a certain number of staff officers.

The General Officer charged, under the direction of the Head of the Mission, with questions of operations, will have as his particular duty, to study in detail the plans and orders of operations and to follow their execution, so as to be able to supply his chief with the necessary information for the accomplishment of his task, both with respect to the French Higher Command and with respect to the British Higher Command.

He will keep in constant touch with the Third Bureau of the French

General Staff and with the Operations Section of the British General Staff.

4. The General Officer charged, under the direction of the Head of the Mission, with questions concerning administrative services, has the duty:

of knowing the resources and the needs of the British Armies as well as the means placed at their disposal by the French Higher Command, and in particular, transport and labour;  
of foreseeing in good time the problems relating to these questions which may arise from the development of operations, and of studying their solution.

He will keep in constant touch on the one hand with the French D.A. [*Direction de l'Arrière*] and on the other hand with the British Quartermaster General and Director of Transport.

5. The staff officers attached to the aforesaid General Officers will be charged with the work of the Staff and with the liaison which their respective Missions entail.

R. NIVELLE

London, 13th March, 1917

I agree with the above on the understanding that, while I am fully determined to carry out the Calais Agreement in spirit and letter, the British Army and its Commander-in-Chief will be regarded by General Nivelle as allies and not as subordinates, except during the particular operations which he explained at the Calais Conference.

Further, while I also accept the agreement respecting the functions of the British Mission at French Headquarters, it should be understood that these functions may be subject to modifications as experience shows to be necessary.

D. HAIG,  
Field Marshal

## APPENDIX XXII

(CHAPTER XI, P. 197)

[ROBERTSON TO NIVELLE: MARCH 13TH, 1917]

My dear General,

I want to take this opportunity to repeat to you, what I said to you this morning, that I will do my best to give you all the help that I can in your heavy task.

For some time past we have been working at and drawing up conventions, but the most essential thing of all is that we should work together with cordiality and that we should have complete confidence in each other. This is worth more than all conventions on paper.

The French and British Armies have been waging war side by side for more than two and a half years, and I firmly believe that they have supported the ordeal of an alliance better than any two peoples have ever done. We soldiers know that it is difficult for allies to work in agreement. I believe, and I have often said, that never, in any war, have two allies worked better together than the French and the English.

This is my firm belief. Of course it is inevitable that from time to time one should encounter difficulties, but I am certain that they will evaporate if we are convinced that each of us is doing his utmost for the common cause. I have no doubt whatever that we each have this intention, and that is why I contemplate the future with confidence.

I wish you a good journey back to France, and the greatest success in the forthcoming operations. We have never had a better chance of achieving important results than we have this year.

The French and British War Cabinets seem to recognize that the soldiers are the persons best qualified to settle military questions, and we must make it our endeavour to settle all difficulties that may arise, without calling on Ministers to intervene; they have their own work to do and at the same time feel how difficult it is to decide between two opposed military opinions.

Allow me to tell you, once more, that my sole aim has and has been, since the beginning of the war, to work as usefully as possible in agreement with the French Army and its Commander-in-Chief.

Believe me,

Sincerely yours,

W. ROBERTSON

[Translated from the French]

## APPENDIX XXIII

(CHAPTER XIV, P. 241)

### NOTES ON THE ADVANCE FROM THE AUTHOR'S DIARY AND REPORTS

ON the 16th and 17th an attempt was made to carry out the original programme of artillery movements, somewhat modified to suit circumstances, but it broke down.

On the 19th the G.A.N. ordered the withdrawal of the tractor-drawn guns.

The worst traffic blocks occurred on the 18th and 19th at the passage of the old front lines, and on the 20th and 21st ten to twelve kilometres farther east.

The average rate of advance of the artillery on these days varied from a few hundred yards to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  kilometres an hour. Motor lorries, a few of which had been pushed forward, caused very serious blocks. The horse-drawn heavy artillery also had great difficulty in advancing. Obstacles such as the Canal du Nord were very hard to negotiate. Bridges capable of carrying infantry and field artillery were useless in their case. One group tried to cut across country (four kilometres) to pass through a tunnel, and took thirty-six hours to do the journey.

The *détachements d'observation et de liaison* proved extremely valuable, but were constantly paralysed by infantry commanders who insisted upon keeping artillery officers and men by them.

It was found that the best co-operation between infantry and artillery was obtained in those formations where every available mounted man from the divisional cavalry or anywhere else was attached to the artillery units in front line. These men worked best when they brought back information at stated intervals (every hour or every two hours) concerning the situation of the infantry.

This system proved to be invaluable, for there were cases in which artillery units, awaiting information, remained for twenty-four hours without any. A dictum was in fact made up at the time—'When information is not forthcoming two people are to blame, the man who ought to have sent it and the man who failed to send for it.'

The results obtained by aircraft varied greatly. The weather was of course a hindrance, but it is noteworthy that nevertheless some artillery units were kept constantly informed by the air service of the line reached by the infantry.

The factor governing all others in a rapid advance such as this was the question of supplying the troops. The numbers that could be engaged therefore depended directly upon the number of roads and the means of transport available. If the enemy opposed a greater resistance than could be overcome by the troops that could be brought up, that is supplied on that particular front, then the advance was held up and he could not be dislodged until the means of communication had been improved, unless an advance at another point determined his retreat.

In practice, when moving rapidly forward it was found that the front allotted to a division should be approximately 5,000 metres.

It was found that each division while advancing should have at its disposal the whole of the field artillery of another division, the one in position covering the advance, the other advancing in echelon so as to provide artillery in depth in case of a strong counter-attack. It was found that these artillery formations should only be allotted half a day's munitions.

Going into further detail, practice taught that each division should have three batteries of short 155 mm., as these guns could do counter-battery work up to 9,000 metres and were equally effective at carrying out destruction.

It was also found that each army corps should push well forward from four to six batteries of long-range guns. The lightest guns available should be used. The French had a good weapon for this purpose, the 105 mm., whose ammunition was not heavy.

The heavy artillery got much strung out, the lighter guns outdistancing the heavier ones, but in spite of all difficulties the horse-drawn heavies were invaluable whenever they could be brought into action. On the Ailette, for instance, where the enemy put up a stout resistance and which proved to be a serious obstacle, my own observation, confirmed by the views of the infantry and artillery commanders on the spot, was that the French could probably not have crossed it had there not been a few batteries of heavies north of the Oise, which enfiladed the enemy's positions and were well placed to do counter-battery work.

It was found in practice that the average number of shells per heavy gun which it was found practicable to bring up was from forty to fifty rounds, though in many cases even this number was not available.

It was found that it was best to send forward the 105 mm. first and that these should be followed by the 155 mm. howitzers, which gave valuable moral support to the infantry, were useful against villages and did good counter-battery work.

The conclusion drawn was that a large number of heavy guns, impossible to supply, was worse than useless, and that only the number of heavy

guns that could be plentifully supplied with ammunition should be sent forward.

The tractor-drawn guns should be sent up only where needed and then only when the roads are decongested and strong enough to carry them and when adequate ammunition dumps have been prepared.

The conclusion I myself came to, after talking to a great many officers who had taken part in the advance and were fully alive to the difficulties they had met, was that the horse-drawn heavy artillery should follow a short day's march behind the front line.

There is little doubt that had the enemy counter-attacked seriously before the French reached the Crozat Canal it would have been almost impossible to supply with munitions the field artillery and the few heavy artillery batteries that had got through.

#### NOTES ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF THE FRENCH CAVALRY DURING THE ADVANCE

The cavalry was as usual badly employed. It started too far back. Had the advance not been held up by the enemy's resistance, which gave the horses a chance of rest, the wastage would have been very great.

The cavalry was as much affected by the problem of road-congestion as were the other arms. Special arrangements should have been made in advance to get it through the crust of the infantry without delay, and all else subordinated to this, since the whole rate of progress depended upon the intervention of the cavalry more than upon any other factor.

The cavalry claimed that, since they had been held up at river-passages and other defiles, it was necessary that in future a cavalry corps should have attached to it a group of heavy artillery. They maintained that the moral effect of turning heavy guns on the enemy rearguards would have been very great.

This was under the circumstances a counsel of perfection, though the importance of pushing forward the lightest type of heavy artillery should not be lost sight of.

The two divisions of cavalry engaged found themselves compelled by circumstances to act as divisional cavalry. Had this been foreseen from the outset, time would have been gained and some confusion avoided.

The air squadron attached to the cavalry worked very badly with it, probably because it had only been attached to it a few days before the advance began.

It is strange how difficult it seemed to be to get the Higher Command to realize how essential it was that detachments of different arms intended to fight together should get to know each other intimately, which must take time. Everyone paid lip service to the principle but few practised it.

Cavalrymen and airmen both knew their work and what was expected of them, but they did not know each other, and war depends more than any other human activity on the personal element, men's knowledge of and confidence in each other. Men who are risking their lives can only work well in company with those whom they have learnt to trust, whose methods and minds they know.

It was found that the group of 75's forming an integral part of each division did not suffice to cover the front of the division, nor did it contain sufficient guns to deal effectively with the German rearguards. The conclusion I drew was that in case of a pursuit each cavalry division should be reinforced by a group of field artillery.

Liaison between the cavalry and the other arms worked badly, as it did in fact generally during the advance.

The divisional cavalry was called upon to detach so many men to furnish escorts for prisoners, provide extra road police, and for liaison detachments, that it was far too weak to carry out its work at the moment when it was most required.

I found that there was much to learn from the experience of regimental officers in this new phase of the campaign. It had been found, for instance, that the smallest unit which was of any value for contact work was the squadron. A troop proved to be inadequate for the purpose, and it was found in practice that single squadrons were constantly and unnecessarily held up, owing to their numerical weakness, by very small German detachments. The leading squadrons were for ever having to be reinforced, causing great delay, until the practice of working two squadrons together was adopted. Cyclists attached to these squadrons proved of the greatest value.

The German rearguards almost invariably halted at villages and other well-defined points to resist the pursuing French. The cavalry were never able to drive out the enemy from these by frontal attack, but they invariably fell back when their flanks were threatened.

Another valuable lesson was that cavalry contact squadrons were quite useless unless they were given definite objectives.

## APPENDIX XXIV

### (CHAPTER XV, P. 250)

#### THE ITALIAN DEMAND FOR ANGLO-FRENCH ASSISTANCE

GENERAL CADORNA had but one idea, to take precautions against an Austrian attack in the Trentino, which he expected to take place at any time after April 15th. He was already transporting his heavy artillery from the Isonzo to that front. General Nivelles asked whether he would assume the offensive on the Isonzo, but this was the last thing the Italian Commander-in-Chief had in mind. His reply was to demand that French troops be held in readiness to intervene in Italy, should he be attacked by Austro-German forces.

Generals Robertson and Weygand, who had gone to Italy, declared they could not shake the Italian Commander-in-Chief's views. He was persuaded that he would be attacked by 75 or 80 divisions and was even thinking of withdrawing from the Isonzo to the Piave. He struck the emissaries as being overwhelmed by a sense of impending disaster and dwelt gloomily on what a catastrophe an Italian defeat would be to the Allied cause.

He insisted that the principle of direct intervention by Anglo-French forces on his front should be accepted and that twenty divisions should be held in readiness to be transported there the moment they were required.

These demands were sturdily opposed by General Robertson. He would go no farther than to say that the British would probably come to the help of the Italians if it were really necessary and if sufficient troops could be spared.

General Weygand reported that the Italian artillery had seventeen million reserve shells. The Trentino defences were strong, but nothing beyond minor offensives could be expected from the Italians.

General Nivelles, when he heard what had transpired at Italian Headquarters, assumed a more conciliatory attitude than gruff old Wully had done. He let General Cadorna know that the principle of direct intervention in Italy would be considered by the French and British War Committees, and that meanwhile he was sending a general and some staff officers to study the conditions under which French troops could best intervene in Italy, should they be required to do so. Attention was also being given, he said, to the question of the transport of troops across the Alps.



## APPENDIX XXV

### (CHAPTER XIX, P. 315)

#### TACTICAL PLAN FOR THE BATTLE OF ARRAS

##### *Front of Attack and Formations*

THE plan of attack for brigades varied according to the objective and the nature of the ground, but as a general rule the front of attack was approximately 600 yards. In most cases the two leading battalions were to take the first and second objectives. The other two battalions were then to pass through on their way to attack the next enemy line. The troops were to advance in a series of waves, each wave consisting of two lines followed by a line of moppers-up.

##### *Reserve of Officers*

Ever since Loos, not more than twenty officers per battalion were allowed to go into battle, thus eliminating the risk of a unit being left officerless. The remainder, together with some men, were left at the transport lines to form an immediately available reserve.

##### *The Assault and the Barrage*

The question of the distance to be covered in the first bound had been carefully studied. The general rule followed was that where no-man's-land exceeded 200 yards in depth the assaulting troops were to form up outside their trenches in the open at about 100 yards from their objectives.

The plan generally adopted as likely to ensure the most rapid advance was lifts of the barrage which varied from fifty yards every  $1\frac{1}{2}$  minutes to a hundred yards every four minutes.

An example of the barrage scheme of one of the attacking divisions may be given.

Zero — the moment of attack — the barrage was to open fifty yards in front of the German first line trench, completing the destruction of the wire.

Zero plus one minute — barrage on German front line for three minutes.

Zero plus four — our infantry in enemy trench. Lifts varying according to the front between three and four minutes per hundred yards to be covered by the leading wave.

Zero plus 2 hours 23 minutes — third objective reached.

Zero plus 5 hours 43 minutes — last objective reached.  
Leap-frogging division passes through.

*Liaison between the Infantry and Artillery during an Attack*

Great efforts were made to improve communications between the attacking infantry and artillery. It had been decided to simplify signals as far as possible. Green lights meant 'Open Fire,' white lights 'Lengthen the Range', but the system did not work very well.

## APPENDIX XXVI

(CHAPTER XXI, P. 345)

[MICHELER TO NIVELLE: MARCH 22ND, 1917]

The situation of the Armies as a whole, as well as the situation of the G.A.R. in particular, has been modified since your instruction No. 25. 808 of December 30th, with regard to the plan of operations for 1917.

### I

I take first of all the situation of the G.A.R.

The German strength on our front has certainly increased, although I cannot be certain to what extent: certainly by three new divisions, perhaps four or five.

In rear there are a number of reserve divisions which our information does not allow us to assess exactly (perhaps four to six divisions north-east of Reims) without counting the forces which the enemy may have accumulated in the neighbourhood of Laon since his retirement.

This is not the most important point; but one must admit that the break-through may take longer than we have reckoned, for we shall find ourselves faced by forces echeloned in depth, and therefore we shall be unable to occupy the third and fourth positions.

On the front of the Sixth Army, the situation has totally changed since the voluntary retirement of the enemy.

As far as can be ascertained from our aerial reconnaissances, the new German line, from Laffaux Mill, runs west of Mennejean Farm, the salient east of Chimy Farm, the slopes east of the Signal de l'Orme, and rejoins the Aisne at Couvaille Mill.

Therefore if as previously anticipated the XXXVII Corps could have held its defensive position south of the Aisne with one active infantry division and one territorial division, this is no longer possible in view of the new front, which is twelve kilometres long in a straight line north of the Aisne. I have therefore had to reinforce the XXXVII Corps with an infantry division from the VI Corps (127th Division).

On the other hand, the sector gained north of the Aisne gives us valuable possibilities of action both by artillery and infantry opposite Laffaux Mill, and creates an offensive zone of by no means negligible importance.

But, if it is possible to defend a front twelve kilometres long with two *active* infantry divisions, three divisions will be needed to attack the salient

of Laffaux Mill while holding the remainder of the front. In view of a possible reaction by the enemy, I have authorized the Commander of the Sixth Army to hold a division of the XI Corps in reserve behind the XXXVII Corps; and I should add that it may be necessary to consider relieving some of the troops engaged north of the Aisne since March 17th.

Does this mean that it is possible to reduce the effectives of the VI Corps to three divisions? This may possibly be justifiable. All it has to do now is to take the Malmaison massif, which, combined with an attack on Laffaux Mill, should make it possible by a co-ordinated effort to reach the Ange Gardien heights.

I would add that if the enemy, abandoning the Aisne, stands on the position Laffaux Mill—Chemin des Dames, the problem for the VI Corps will be complicated, since it will have to establish itself at some distance from the starting-point of the attack, with the Aisne at its back, and we shall be unable to take advantage of the river to economize active formations.

In examining the situation as closely as possible, it becomes clear that it will be necessary to reinforce the XXXVII Corps by one division, and I can only take this division from the XI Corps.

But to weaken the XI Corps, which has to attack in the direction of Laon, will prejudice the chances of exploiting the immediate results of the attack.

## II

Apart from this local question, which has its importance, the general situation has considerably changed.

The operations envisaged in your Instruction of December 30th, 1916, were designed to divide the enemy forces by a number of attacks, and the action of the G.A.R., launched some time after and in relation to the other attacks, certainly gave me every chance of a rapid exploitation in depth against an opponent to whom I could oppose more fresh divisions than he could muster.

Now all this is changed. It is therefore wise to consider how it may be possible to rehandle the operation so that it may be undertaken in conditions approximating to the previous ones.

The only thing which will make this possible is the English attack, if it is carried out with strength and determination, and further, if it is carried out *before* that of the G.A.R. has begun.

But the date you have given me for my attack leads me to believe that it will take place at the same time as that of the British.

To reckon in these circumstances on dividing the German forces is to underestimate your enemy. He will understand at once where his danger lies. I shall have concentrated against my left flank the greater

part of the forces he can muster in the north, and at Mezières the whole of the forces he can muster in the east, that is, at least thirty fresh divisions. It may well be, at the worst, that I shall be held up without being able to break through, and that we run the risk of embarking on a wearing-down battle of indefinite duration. At best, I may be able to get as far as the Serre. I shall certainly hold the enemy's counter-attack, but I do not think that that is your object.

Therefore, if the attacks *before* that of the G.A.R. do not take place, as contemplated in your Instruction of December 30th, the G.A.R.'s offensive has little chance of important results, that is of exploitation.

I have complete confidence in the possibility of being able to fulfil the task allotted to the G.A.R. as laid down in your Instruction of December 30th. I consider, therefore, that the sequence of the combined attacks is an essential condition of success.

### III

Large movements have still to be carried out, by roads with very bad surfaces; and the construction of the railway lines is very much behind-hand.

Whatever happens, and unless, of course, visibility during the bombardment makes this impossible, I will do everything in my power to be ready on the date you have fixed.

MICHELIER

#### *Note by the French Historical Section*

A manuscript note is pinned to this letter: 'The Commander-in-Chief orders that no answer be sent to this letter from General Micheler. It will be sufficient to indicate to General Gamelin in conversation that there may well be an interval of time between the British attacks and his, that he has been told to be ready for April 8th, but that this date is not final'.

APPENDIX XXVII  
(CHAPTER XXII, P. 382)

THE COMPIÈGNE CONFERENCE

[PAINLEVÉ TO RIBOT: APRIL 7TH, 1917]

In accordance with the advice you gave me yesterday, I sent on without any alteration the telegram which General Nivelle wished to send to General Janin [at Russian General Headquarters]. The very strong terms of this telegram were aimed at stimulating and hastening the reorganization of the Russian Army. But, as it was only sent after the conference held yesterday at Compiègne, it is to be feared that it might be considered, in its imperative brevity, as being based on the instructions of the Government and the decisions taken at the conference.

As no written record was taken of the meeting yesterday, I think it may be useful to sum up in a few lines the conclusions arrived at.

The important events of the last few weeks make it more than ever the absolute duty of the Government to ensure that the country, and consequently its armed forces, have the means of holding out. This is the essential purpose of the Government, and from it follow certain obvious consequences, especially at a period of the war when our reserves of manpower have become so weak.

General Nivelle explained to us, with perfect clarity, that if he has accumulated considerable effectives and artillery for the coming battle, he has done so on the one hand to diminish the losses and to be able to exploit the success more thoroughly; and on the other hand so as to be able to break off the battle, if it is not successful, at the moment when he considers this to be necessary.

There is therefore complete agreement between the Government and the Commander-in-Chief that, in the action which is about to begin, there is to be no question of continuing at all costs a battle in which the whole of our forces will be engaged; but that, on the contrary, the battle will be broken off as soon as it appears likely to inflict excessive losses on our army, such as would greatly weaken it, for the sake of obtaining insufficient and uncertain results.

I think, Mr. Prime Minister, you will find that these few lines sum up exactly the conclusions of our meeting yesterday. I thought it essential to put them in writing, and, in order that there may be no misunderstanding, I should be happy if you would kindly ask General Nivelle to see you, so that, alone together, in a spirit of cordiality and confidence, you can define precisely once more our understanding on the subject of the forthcoming operations.

## APPENDIX XXVIII

(CHAPTER XXIII, P. 384)

### THE BATTLE OF ARRAS: THE PRELIMINARY BOMBARDMENT

THERE had been much discussion concerning the length of the preliminary bombardment. General Horne, commanding the First Army, was in favour of a protracted one spread over ten days. General Allenby and his chief artillery adviser, the C.R.A. of the Third Army, General Holland, wanted a short and very intensive one. They believed that thanks to the new 106 fuse the German wire could be destroyed in a far shorter time than had previously been the case. G.H.Q. did not share the Third Army's view. The 106 fuse was not available in very great numbers, and there was a certain lack of experience in its use. These reasons made them decide upon a protracted bombardment. Not long before the attack General Holland was promoted to the command of a corps, and it was believed by many that this was the means chosen by G.H.Q. to overcome the opposition of the Third Army to their point of view.

The final phase of the preliminary bombardment was originally intended to last for two days, during which a uniform rate of fire was to be maintained day and night. It was decided on March 18th to extend it to three days, and on the 30th to four days. These were called W, X, Y and Z days. On April 5th yet another extra day's bombardment was decided upon. As the allocation of ammunition remained unchanged, night-firing was confined to harassing-fire and to concentration upon all communications and avenues of approach.

## APPENDIX XXIX

### (CHAPTER XXV)

#### NOTES ON THE BATTLE OF ARRAS

##### § 1 (p. 421)

*April 9th.*

At about 5 p.m. two German reserve battalions attempted a counter-attack on Fampoux on a front of some 800 yards. It failed, dispersed by what the enemy described as our excellently manned, mobile and effective Lewis guns. Another German reserve battalion got lost and disappeared into the shattered wilderness, remaining beyond the reach of all orders. It finally arrived at Roeux, where its commander was told by artillery officers who were making for the rear that the British were between Roeux and Fampoux. Advancing nevertheless, it found the British had not advanced beyond Fampoux although there was nothing to oppose them. The battalion at once began to dig itself in. It was not disturbed.

##### § 2 (p. 422)

*April 9th.*

These immature boys arrived in the afternoon after a ten hours' march. There were no old soldiers to steady them; as they neared the battlefield they saw on every side signs of defeat: small groups of wounded in the last stages of fatigue and depression wandering back, abandoned transport everywhere, near Gavrelle derelict guns and overturned limbers. There was no news, and furthermore they were quite alone and somewhat uncertain of their destination. No sign of other troops as they advanced across the open. Gavrelle was being heavily shelled by the heavies as they skirted it. A hard introduction to war. They finally found themselves in the Green Line where the trenches had half fallen in. They were still quite alone; no troops manned the broken defences either to their right or left. No sign on the slopes they were facing of the machine-guns which earlier had held up our advance. They knew nothing of the Pioneer companies, of which there were no visible signs. Across the space of many years one cannot but be moved and send out a greeting of respect and admiration to those very gallant youths, the children of an alien race, who were probably hardly strong enough even to carry a rifle and heavy equipment for half so long a march as they had achieved. Their courage must have been of a very high quality not only to conquer



fatigue but to enable them to face alone a victorious army which, they must have thought, was on the point of advancing in overwhelming numbers. One thing they must have known: that they were far too weary to retire. They could only fight and die where they stood; unsupported as they were, they could not have resisted a determined attack for more than a few moments; but they were left in peace.

## § 3 (p. 422)

*April 9th.*

When the 4th Division reached the Green Line it had to its left the undefended gap between Bailleul and Gavrelle. Had it then faced north, or sent some elements towards the space between these two places, the advance of the 34th and 51st Divisions would have been greatly facilitated, for the enemy detachments which were holding up their advance would certainly not have stood their ground when they found we were advancing into their backs. Such a movement would have made inevitable the one thing the Germans feared above all others north of the Scarpe, the capture of Bailleul.

## § 4 (p. 423)

*April 9th.*

At 2 p.m. the 15th Division advanced against the Brown Line. The attacking infantry at once came under fire from enemy guns at close range. These they rushed. The keenness of the men was such that again they dashed into their own barrage. The railway line running parallel to the Scarpe gave trouble, as the Triangle had done in the morning. Scattered machine-guns had also to be dealt with, but by 4 p.m. this division was in the Brown Line, although the protective wire belt had been little damaged. A tank played a useful part in flattening out paths through it.

Next in line, the 12th Division was less fortunate. Starting to the attack on the Brown Line at 12.15, although some portions of the Blue Line only fell to us a quarter of an hour later and several points in rear remained in the enemy's hands for considerably longer, it seemed as if the tremendous onrush of the attack would carry all before it.

The men were very confident; they had seen the enemy on the run, and a battalion of the Berkshire Regiment, which had found itself facing four German batteries firing point blank at four hundred yards range, had not only rushed these and captured the gunners, but, under the direction of an artillery officer accompanying the battalion, turned the eighteen field pieces and four howitzers on to the enemy and blazed away to its heart's content. The attacking troops had been further cheered by the

sight of a Field Artillery brigade galloping into action. But the advance did not last long. The wire ahead was uncut, there was insufficient artillery support for the infantry, some of the batteries not having come up owing to the delay in the earlier advance, and the attack came to a standstill in front of the Brown Line. A weak German counter-attack at 2 p.m. was repulsed, but nothing further was achieved.

The 3rd Division also failed to gain a footing in the Brown Line owing to uncut wire.

15 (p. 423)

*April 9th.*

The whole of the German field artillery on the front of the VI Corps was silenced, abandoned or captured. Six heavy guns alone remained in action. A battery of heavy howitzers still undamaged could not fire owing to lack of ammunition.

The very last German reserves in this sector had been engaged since twelve noon. It was not until night that reinforcements appeared, four battalions in all, from the *220th Division* which faced our 62nd Division, six miles to the south.

Meanwhile VI Corps Headquarters were not aware of the situation of their own troops." It was not till 6.15 p.m., two and a quarter hours after the event, that the Corps Commander heard definitely that the 15th Division were in the Brown Line. Believing his three front line divisions were held up, he had meanwhile ordered an attack on this line at 7 p.m., asking the VII Corps on his right to co-operate; but as soon as he heard that the 15th Division had reached the Brown Line, he ordered the 37th Division to push through it and attack Monchy-le-Preux, the main objective of the Corps and the key position of the southern attack.

Then a series of mistakes, some unfortunate, others inexcusable, took place.

The 15th Division was ordered to help clear the front of the 12th. The G.O.C. of the latter, who had sent a small detachment through the 15th Division to help clear his own front, assumed when he received this order that he was relieved of all responsibility for dislodging the enemy facing him, and recalled the detachment, taking no further steps to turn the enemy out of their trenches.

The 37th Division somehow lost direction. Its leading brigades, instead of passing through the gap on the 15th Division's front, moved too far to their right and became mixed up with the leading brigades of the 3rd and 12th Divisions. The reserve brigade of the 37th Division, keeping better direction, did however eventually appear behind the 15th Division and passed through it.

Here all seemed well and the men of the latter division were greatly

elated in spite of the horrible weather conditions. Their neighbours north of the Scarpe were, they knew, well forward, the troops of the following divisions were passing through them, and they had seen the corps mounted troops pass over the Brown Line they had captured, and gallop beyond, accompanied (most inspiring of sights) by horse artillery.

News came back that the cavalrymen had captured some howitzers. But the reserve brigade of the 37th Division had not the time or the weight to get very far. Some of its troops gained the northern half of Orange Hill well to the east of the Brown Line, the mounted troops prolonging the line to the north where they were in touch with the 4th Division on the Scarpe.

Meanwhile the attack ordered by the G.O.C. VI Corps at 7 p.m. on the unconquered portion of the Brown Line had failed. Only the 3rd Division and the 14th Division of the VII Corps took part, and the 12th Division did not move owing to the misunderstanding just alluded to.

A contemporary account in my possession, written by a battalion commander of the 15th Division, tells how, in the middle of the afternoon, there were a number of companies of both the 15th and 37th Divisions in Battery Valley. Some of the brigadiers of the latter division were also there. The 15th Division had, so the writer says, found the Brown Line unoccupied, and he confirms the fact that a tank had flattened out the wire, which presented no obstacle. There was a good deal of talk and consultation as to what should be done. The general consensus of opinion was that it was rather late to push on. No effort was made to advance on Monchy as ordered. At the time, so this officer avers, the cavalry could have galloped to Monchy and occupied the place without great difficulty.

He is probably right in this, for, according to enemy accounts, even by midnight all the Germans were able to muster between the Arras-Cambrai road and the Scarpe, on a front of some two thousand five hundred yards, was two companies in front line, one and a half companies in second line, two machine-guns covering the northern position of the front held, and six machine-guns defending the approaches of Monchy-le-Preux, although at that late hour some portion of the four battalions from the reserves of the 220th Division must have been approaching the battlefield.

A little more luck and a little more drive would certainly have given us the key position of Monchy-le-Preux by nightfall.

#### § 6 (p. 424)

*April 9th.*

Concerning what occurred on the remainder of the battlefield there is little to tell

The 15th Division, as has been seen, alone had a footing in the Brown Line, of which it held some thousand yards south of the Scarpe.

The centre of the 12th Division was less advanced than either of its flanks, and from its right the line ran continuously back to the left of the 56th Division, where scarcely any progress was made beyond the Blue Line.

The right of the 56th Division, however, gained some ground, but its southern neighbour, the 30th, did not meet with the same success. The 56th, therefore, presented a flank to the south and suffered severely. It nevertheless obtained a footing in the Hindenburg Line. The 30th and 21st Divisions gained little ground.

The VII Corps, like the VI, ordered the attack to be resumed next morning, but the divisional commanders pointed out that this was impossible until the situation had been cleared up. During the night considerable uncertainty prevailed as to where our troops in this sector actually were.

It was machine-guns and not artillery that prevented our advancing on the southern part of the battlefield. Here, fighting on a new front and against the formidable Hindenburg position, our preparations had necessarily been hasty and our guns held farther back than was desirable. But if our artillery did not succeed in neutralizing the hostile machine-guns, the counter-battery work on the other hand was excellent. The following is a German account of the plight in which a battery on this front found itself.

'Most of the guns stood abandoned. Many were blown to pieces, others lay on their sides with gaping breeches. The ground about them was completely ploughed up. Not a square metre in their neighbourhood but had been hit. Shell-cases, carrying-baskets, ammunition, were strewn in every direction. Beside the guns lay the dead gunners. Several guns were being served that evening by only two gunners, one by a solitary officer.'

The officer commanding the German 11th Division reported that by 3 p.m. the whole of the guns of the 17th Reserve Division had been shot to pieces. As for the infantry, it seems there were three hundred and fifty rifles left to hold our attack east of Neuville Vitasse. A battalion intended to reinforce this sector was delayed for hours by the attack of British aircraft and long-range shelling.

§ 7 (p. 427)

*April 10th.*

The Canadians captured Hill 145 which had given such trouble on the previous day.

At 5 a.m. the 34th Division attacked the uncaptured portion of the

Brown Line on its left. Our advancing waves were met by machine-gun and rifle fire, but the enemy did not await them. Exhausted by exposure, Scots and Northumbrians could not pursue them. Standing on the Brown Line they fired at the enemy fleeing down the slope. Lewis guns did execution at long range. Patrols pushed forward but found nothing except abandoned guns.

The attack was not pressed. Towards evening the airmen reported a concentration of troops near Bailleul. When this developed into an attack towards Maison de la Côte at 7.15 p.m., an artillery brigade caught the enemy under accurate fire and dispersed them. The Germans say it was a mercy the British did not push on that evening. Had they attacked regardless of consequences, the result, they tell us, could not have been foreseen. What German guns there were had not been able to replenish their ammunition, and the infantry, so their accounts run, were at the end of their tether. Physically and mentally exhausted, the survivors seeing their guns not firing and our planes flying undisturbed overhead, free to report their position to the English artillery, lost hope and with it all power of action. On the night of the 10th-11th the worn-out troops of the *1st Bavarian Reserve Division* were relieved without being disturbed by us. It had lost one hundred and twelve officers and three thousand and twenty-five men.

Equally sad is it that advantage was not taken of the magnificent advance of the 9th and 4th Divisions north of the Scarpe. Their opponents, the *14th Bavarian Division*, were, according to their own account, completely exhausted. One fresh regiment, as has been seen, came up during the night of the 9th-10th. Unable to fill the gaps and believing the situation of the front line troops to be desperate, the newcomers concentrated their efforts upon digging trenches between Gavrelle and Oppy (a line we only reached in the following December) and from Gavrelle to Plouvain (which we never reached).

The 9th Division, which could have broken through between Bailleul and Gavrelle at any time, spent the night of the 9th in the open, needlessly exposed to the weather, and the 10th cleaning and salvaging the battlefield. The 4th Division continued on the 10th to occupy the position gained on the previous day.

An attempt made to advance immediately north of the Scarpe in the early afternoon failed. Lack of control and of staff work on our side is shown by an attempt that was made to use cavalry in this sector. The 1st Cavalry Brigade was ordered to advance along the north bank of the river, capture Plouvain and Greenland Hill and then strike northwards. The enemy were entrenched in this sector, as would have been known had any responsible staff officer reconnoitred the position. This fact had been made patent by the earlier repulse of the infantry attack.

Arriving at Athies, the brigade sent forward a squadron of the 5th Dragoon Guards to Fampoux. Finding themselves in a bottle-neck and faced by an entrenched enemy with machine-guns, the Dragoons were compelled to retire with some loss. The German line was hardening hour by hour and the artillery was regaining some of its pristine vigour. What is particularly strange is that the cavalry were ordered forward only at noon, with twelve miles to cover over roads congested with traffic and with the battlefield to cross. If the Command considered their employment justifiable it would have been wise to send them forward earlier.

It was not until noon that the 12th and 3rd Divisions south of the Scarpe attacked and captured the Brown Line facing them. Meanwhile a brigade of the 37th Division, advancing through the portion of the Brown Line held by the 15th, completed the capture of Orange Hill.

When just before 1 p.m. it was certain that we held the Brown Line, the 37th Division was ordered to assault the Green Line and capture Monchy before dark; the remaining divisions were to consolidate the Brown Line. Two brigades of artillery that had negotiated the battle zone, a far easier matter here than in the Vimy area, were sent up to support the advance of the 37th Division which was already covered by the heavies.

Presently the 37th Division reported that they were in Monchy, which was unfortunately not the fact.

The two cavalry divisions, which were in the positions they had occupied the night before, were ordered forward. One brigade advanced to Neuville Vitasse, another towards Wancourt, and two more towards Orange Hill and Monchy.

Watchers from Telegraph Hill had a fine view of the advancing cavalry, which presented a magnificent sight, cantering easily across open country. It seemed as if another and a better war, one of free movement and manœuvre, were about to begin.

Occasionally a shell burst amongst the fast-moving ranks, and men and horses rolled over, but still the brigades advanced, only to find the enemy occupying a continuous line of defence that brought them to a halt. At nightfall some brigades withdrew while others prepared to remain where they were in spite of the bitter cold.

Little occurred on the front of the VII Corps, but some ground was gained towards the junction of the Hindenburg and Wancourt Lines. At nightfall the 14th Division was lying in front of the Wancourt Line, but owing to its losing direction a large gap was created between it and the 56th. Farther south there was no marked change.

As on the VI Corps front, so on that of the VII, there had been a moment when it seemed as if the cavalry were coming into their own. On the

strength of a report that there was a gap in the German line between Guenappe and Wancourt, the 5th Cavalry Brigade (12th Lancers, Scots Greys and 20th Hussars) was ordered forward. Passing over the old lines along the only track available by Tilloy-les-Moufflaines in half sections (two men abreast), for it was not wide enough to take troops on a wider front, the cavalry formed up in line of troop columns, a very difficult manœuvre in the circumstances, especially in a snowstorm, but our magnificent cavalry carried it out without a hitch, and presently between two snow flurries the whole brigade could be seen, galloping forward as smoothly and easily as if they had been on Salisbury Plain. But alas the report was inaccurate; there was no gap. Officer patrols reported that our infantry in front line was not only held up but unsupported, the nearest reserves being very far back and out of touch with it. The cavalry sent forward dismounted detachments to strengthen the infantry line, but these had to withdraw to their horses at nightfall, leaving the foot soldiers in an unenviable position, lying foodless and coatless, exposed to the merciless weather, very much in the air and with little artillery support. The infantry had to break into their iron rations that night.

While our men were lying ineffective and helpless, the enemy facing them, confronted, so they believed, by a victorious army that might at any moment resume the attack in overwhelming numbers, had lost all initiative. They were not only an exhausted but a beaten force. Their commanders were as anxious concerning this sector of the battlefield as they were about the situation farther north. What reserves they could lay hands on were rushed forward, and during the late afternoon the *17th Reserve Division* was reinforced by troops of the *3rd Bavarian Division*. Battalions and companies were sent forward as they arrived. Their orders invariably were to counter-attack, but none was able to do so. All that happened was that they were absorbed by the thin and unsteady line, but a good many batteries arrived, and taking up fresh positions were soon in readiness to give the infantry some support.

#### § 8 (p. 429).

*April 11th.*

North of the Scarpe, the 4th Division was ordered to capture Greenland Hill, but after some sharp fighting failed to gain their first objectives, Roeux and the Chemical Works.

#### § 9 (p. 429)

*April 11th.*

There is little to tell concerning events south of Monchy.

Early that afternoon the dreary expanse of the village seemed empty.

At times the whole landscape was blotted out by falling snowflakes isolating every group. It was as if some velvet-footed power, deaf and mute, bent upon obliterating by silence the memory of all the crashing ear-splitting noise, had taken charge, spreading a white pall over the black mire. At intervals, when it was possible to see a long way under low clouds the colour of diluted ink, a few shells could be observed bursting in the distance, a line of khaki-clad men would rise and rush forward, many would fall, the line would halt suddenly and the men, flinging themselves down, would instantly become indistinguishable specks amongst a thousand other specks sprinkling the white expanse.

From time to time an incident focused the attention of everyone in sight for a few moments. By Guemappe, so the Germans say, one of our tanks suddenly appeared on the right of their *18th Reserve Division* and sent a regiment scuttling away in a panic, but soon a shell found it, and it flared up like a gigantic squib, a red light in the distance seen through a veil of falling snow.

The 3rd Division only succeeded in driving the enemy into Guemappe, and the VII Corps made no appreciable progress; not that our men did not strive to advance, but the forward movement was not organized. A lamentable example of this fact occurred before Wancourt. The brigade facing that place was informed that it was to attack at 6.40 a.m., that the barrage would begin at 6.30 and that the infantry was to evacuate the front line so as to enable the guns to range on it. One battalion, the 7th King's Royal Rifles, obeyed the order and was to all intents and purposes wiped out by German machine-guns, losing four hundred and forty out of six hundred men. Their next-door neighbours, better advised, decided to risk the barrage and remained where they were. They had no casualties, and no wonder, for the barrage when it did come down consisted of about thirty shrapnel shells that fell north of Wancourt.

This incident serves to illustrate how hopeless was the task of the infantry and what little chance they had of advancing without adequate artillery support, for the shooting on this front, save for that of E Battery, R.H.A., was very poor that day. Nevertheless, with a heroism to which the enemy bore testimony, our men attacked again and again with true British doggedness until their last reserves had been engaged. Then and then only did they give up the attempt to advance. It would not be fair, however, to blame the gunners, who were struggling against almost insuperable difficulties to bring forward both their pieces and the ammunition to serve them through a veritable quagmire, while attempting to locate the distant infantry along their ill-defined line.

German observers witnessed that afternoon a curious spectacle in this sector, one which will perhaps never again be repeated, the old warfare and the new being tried out on the same battlefield, cavalry and tanks



in movement together. It was as if an attempt were being made to hew a rock with a stone hatchet and a pneumatic drill at the same time.

The enemy about Wancourt suddenly saw a great mass of horsemen, which may have belonged to our 5th Cavalry Brigade, sweep into view. A few moments later four tanks waddled forward from the direction of St. Martin-sur-Cojeul. Even at that moment of tense excitement German officers could not help comparing the new and the old, the power of the slow ugly machine and the vulnerability of the lovely swift cavalry that seemed in the distance to be flowing like foam borne by a torrent down the distant slopes.

The Germans turned their machine-guns on the cavalry which they believed was about to charge. They saw it disappear and with pardonable exaggeration speak of severe losses inflicted and of many empty saddles.

The cavalry had never intended to charge. The enemy must have caught a glimpse of the regiments changing ground. As for the empty saddles, the very slight losses suffered show how in this case the wish fathered the report. The incident indeed proves once more a fact that had been demonstrated many times before, namely that machine-guns are of little avail against swiftly moving horsemen in fairly extended order. The whole incident only lasted a few moments. Hardly had the cavalry been sighted when they disappeared, swallowed up by a fold of the ground as if they had galloped into some gigantic cavern. Not so the tanks. Nosing their way forward, one moment with snouts in air, the next tilted like rocking chairs beyond their point of balance, they looked as if they could not recover themselves till they did so with a jerk. They pursued their sluggish way, shambling, shuffling, clanging along, spitting fire as they went. Every machine-gun, every rifle in the neighbourhood, was brought to bear on them without avail. Brave men crept forward and hurled grenades that exploded harmlessly, a *minenwerfer* belched bombs at them without apparently affecting their advance in the least. The Germans broke and fled, herded towards Heninel by the great titlupping machines.

The situation appeared to the Germans desperately serious until evening. They would have been reassured could they have realized our difficulties. We were faced by machine-guns better placed and in greater numbers than their own Command imagined. These our guns, struggling forward through the mud and still out of effective range, could not master, and so our infantry was helpless.

At 4 p.m. the Commander of the *3rd Bavarian Division* took over command from the General commanding the *17th Reserve Division*. His task was neither an easy nor a pleasant one. He had no idea whether there were any of his troops left in Monchy, nor can he have had any

very clear views concerning the remainder of his command, for there were elements of no less than four divisions, inextricably mixed, scattered along his front. In one regiment nine companies were dispersed amongst other units. Nevertheless it was found possible to withdraw most of the *17th Division* during the night.

That night also our exhausted infantry on the southern front of attack (they had had no food for two days except their iron rations) were relieved. Next morning it was found the enemy had abandoned Wancourt, which the infantry commanders on the spot believed could have been captured on the 10th, had adequate artillery support been available.

The weather had indeed played us false. The difficulty of bringing forward our guns was the main factor that prevented the Battle of Arras from being a great, perhaps a decisive victory. Even on the 11th the Germans had not been able to bring up reserves in any considerable strength to oppose us. It had been a terrible day for them. Their artillery was still too short of ammunition to take full advantage of the numerous targets our troops offered. Immense masses of British troops had been reported in movement. Cavalry in great numbers had been seen, evidently ready to ride through the gap they were persuaded our infantry were about to tear in their line. In spite of every effort, only few and scattered reserves were available, and it was obvious that if the cavalry got through, their front might indeed be broken, for the British horsemen would have a wide stretch of open country to ride across unhindered; the Drocourt-Quéant line barred the way, it is true, but there were only the remnants of broken units withdrawn from the line to garrison it. So imminent was the danger considered to be during the anxious hours of daylight, that what elements of reserve troops the enemy Command could lay hands on were told off to protect the guns at all costs.

### § 10 (p. 429)

#### THE CAPTURE OF MONCHY

*April 17th.*

Much of the following account is based on the notes of a cavalry brigadier whose command was not engaged, but who watched the operation from an excellent point of vantage.

The 37th Division was to attack Monchy frontally, with on its left the 15th Division advancing between the village and the Scarpe, and the 3rd Division on its right. The assault was timed to take place at 5 a.m. Unfortunately the divisions only received their orders at 11 p.m. on the previous night, the brigades at about 1 a.m. and the battalions as late as a.m. In one instance at least, a battalion on receiving its orders had

only time to march straight up to its position, deploy and attack without a halt.

The way the assaulting troops moved into position by compass-bearing in pitch darkness and blinding snow was beyond all praise, proving that if some units were lacking in instruction this was certainly not a universal rule. For example, the vigour with which the Scots of the 15th Division attacked would have been magnificent at any time, but in the weather prevailing and in view of the fact that this was their third day of battle and exposure to the worst climatic conditions imaginable, it was nothing less than heroic.

Darkness and snow at first served the attack, but the advancing troops had not gone far when S.O.S. signals were sent up by the Germans at Monchy, showing that they had been seen. Heavy machine-gun and artillery fire at once opened from the direction of the village, and a deadly raking machine-gun fire from north of the Scarpe took the attacking waves in rear.

The left brigade of the 15th Division (the 45th), assailed by heavy fire from Monchy, wheeled to face it and proceeded to attack the northern face of the village. It found itself facing loop-holed walls and suffered very heavily.

The next brigade, the 46th (which attacked with only one battalion in line), bore to its right, elbowed by the 45th and facing the fire from Monchy. There resulted a gap in the front of the 45th Brigade, whose right conformed to the movement.

The 46th Brigade, now mixed with troops of the 37th Division, pushed on towards Monchy, suffering heavy loss.

Meanwhile Highlanders had worked their way round to the north of the village and entered it, taking the defenders in rear, while the 37th Division slowly encircled the village from the south.

It was then 8 a.m. The weather was clear and a cold sun showed fitfully through scurrying clouds driven by a bitter wind. At 8.30 great masses of cavalry suddenly appeared. The 6th and 8th Cavalry Brigades were moving forward, preceded by three squadrons drawn from the 3rd Dragoon Guards, Essex Yeomanry and 10th Hussars; the leading squadrons advanced in line of troop columns, the leading troop extended. It was a magnificent sight to see the perfectly aligned squadrons swing over the hill at full gallop through a heavy barrage of artillery and machine-gun fire. The Essex Yeomanry and Hussar squadrons advanced on Monchy as though on manoeuvres, suffering comparatively little loss, while to their right the leading patrols of the 3rd Dragoon Guards, riders leaning forward on their horses' necks, galloped towards La Bergère, from which the Germans fled at the sight of them.

The leading squadrons of the Essex Yeomanry and the 10th Hussars

rode into Monchy, followed by their respective regiments, the 3rd Dragoon Guards forming a defensive front immediately to the south. The cavalry found a few small and very exhausted detachments of infantry already in the village; these, amounting to some seventy men, co-operated with the cavalry in the defence of the buildings, while thirty more strengthened the line held by the 3rd Dragoon Guards. There were in addition some infantrymen in shell-holes south of Monchy.

A tank, which all agree was magnificently handled, played an important part in the rapid capture of the village.

At 11.30 a.m. an order was received from the cavalry division to make no further advance but to strengthen the position. It was not till night-fall that the 12th Division relieved the two cavalry brigades, but two squadrons of the 10th Hussars, one troop of yeomanry and two sections of machine-guns remained for a further twenty-four hours holding the village until relieved by the 29th Division.

The original intention had been that the 8th Brigade should advance north of Monchy, but General Bulkeley-Johnson (who was killed) had told the squadron commanders that if the intense machine-gun fire encountered from north of the Scarpe on April 10th was repeated, they should advance straight on Monchy. They did encounter this fire and consequently wheeled right-handed into Monchy. The village offered good cover for the horses at first, but it turned out to be a trap when the German guns were turned on to the village.

The whole operation was hardly a suitable one for cavalry, but, without it, it is unlikely that Monchy would have been captured that day, or that if captured it could have been held, for the 37th Division, good though it was, well commanded and well staffed, with excellent fighting brigadiers, was utterly exhausted.

Meanwhile the left of the 15th Division, advancing along the Scarpe, had not been progressing very well. It suffered heavily from machine-gun fire from north of the river and was unsupported by its artillery which owing to the mud was unable to come up. The extreme left was held up on the north-east spur of Orange Hill and there was a wide gap between it and a battalion which had succeeded, although with heavy loss (all but four officers fell), in reaching the northern extremity of Monchy.

At 3.30 p.m. it began to rain, and an hour later the rain changed to heavy snow which soon lay thick on the ground.

Some of the area gained during the afternoon between Monchy and the Scarpe was made untenable by enemy fire, and had to be abandoned. The line held at nightfall ran from the northern extremity of Monchy to Lone Copse and on to the eastern slopes of Orange Hill.

When darkness fell the 17th Division came up to relieve the 15th. The

operation took all night and it was not till 6 a.m. on the 12th that the exhausted but triumphant Scots found themselves back in their old line east of Arras.

## § 11 (p. 429)

## THE BATTLE OF BULLECOURT

*April 11th.*

It was part of the plan that General Gough's Fifth Army should co-operate with General Allenby's Army. Although well placed to do so, for in case of success it would advance in the back of the enemy facing General Allenby's troops, it was confronted by the formidable Hindenburg Line, laid out in zigzag so that from each face the attackers could be swept by machine-gun fire. The Fifth Army had followed the retreating enemy faster than they had expected, but the guns had not had time to register, and it had not been possible to bring up ammunition in large quantities; for it had been found necessary to employ a large proportion of the available transport to bring up metal for road-making instead of shells. The attack would in fact have been impossible had artillery alone been relied upon for support, but eleven tanks were available. General Gough, with the most laudable desire to help his neighbour, allowed himself to stake far too heavily upon what the tanks might accomplish.

On the afternoon of the 9th, undoubtedly influenced by exaggerated reports of Allenby's success to the north, and also by the prevailing belief that the Germans would not stand on the Hindenburg Line, he ordered an attack for the next morning, the 10th, by the 4th Australian and 62nd British Divisions. The extraordinary optimism of the tank commanders was undoubtedly an important factor in his decision. They apparently believed that orders could be issued, the ground reconnoitred and the machines brought up in the short time available before daylight next day; nor did they doubt the ability of the eleven tanks to open a way for the attacking infantry through which the 4th Cavalry Division could eventually pass and dislodge the Germans who were holding up the right of the Third Army.

The actual plan of attack was a risky one, justified only as a means of supporting the Third Army; it comprised features that time and again had led to costly failures in the course of the war: a narrow front (in this case emphasized by the fact that the attack was to be launched against a deep re-entrant) and inadequate preparation, the latter counter-balanced only by tanks, uncertain monsters whose commander was as inexperienced as they were themselves unreliable at this stage of the war.

The unfavourable weather (snow was the worst enemy of the tank because it not only increased the soddenness of the ground but also showed

up each machine like a bull's-eye on a target) and the fact that the Australians were totally unfamiliar with tank-tactics tended to give the plan the quality of a gamble, the gamble of a somewhat reckless punter plunging on the advice of an irresponsible tipster.

General Birdwood, commanding the Anzacs, expressed the gravest doubts concerning the wisdom of the operation, but was overruled. He was told that the Commander-in-Chief wished it to take place.

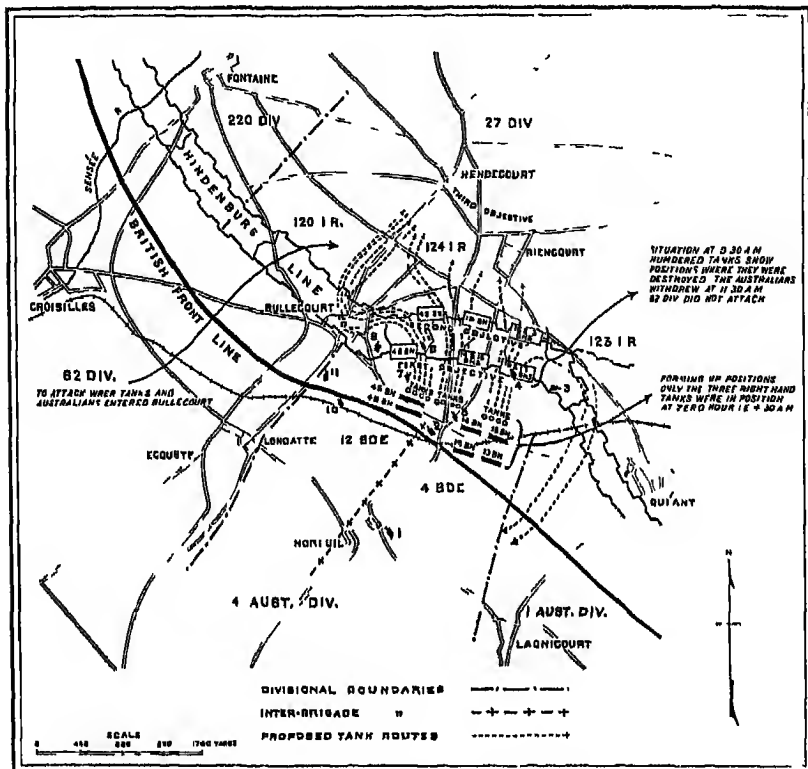
In the freezing cold of the early morning of the 10th the attacking troops took up their positions and lay out in the open waiting. No sign of the tanks. The hour of the attack was postponed. Just before dawn an exhausted tank officer appeared to say the machines were still an hour away. There was not a moment to lose, the troops were ordered to dash back. 'A crowd returning from a football match' was the description of the scene by those who were present. The sullen troops streamed back, disappointed, exasperated, feeling someone had blundered badly. The universal opinion was that but for a providential fall of snow that came down just then, there would have been very heavy casualties amongst the mass of men returning across the open in the chill dawn. They were persuaded the enemy must have seen them, especially as there was some shelling, though it seems that this was not so, and that the artillery fire was due to another cause.

This experience was hardly encouraging, and at a conference called by General Gough at noon on the 10th the Anzac Commander renewed his protest, but after General Gough had communicated with G.H.Q. he stated that the Commander-in-Chief had decided that the attack was to take place next day. The Third Army was renewing its attack on the 11th. The VII Corps should reach the Green Line by 9 a.m., followed by cavalry ready to dash through any gap that appeared. It was therefore highly important that the Fifth Army should co-operate by gaining a footing on the Drocourt-Quéant Line. Such was the gist of General Gough's instructions.

The tale of the attack itself is one of improvisations that did not come off, misunderstandings and muddles, all the more exasperating as the men fought magnificently and in almost every instance were extremely well and always gallantly led.

The first proof of how ill-thought-out was the operation, apart from the fact that the men were worn out by marches and counter-marches and by being out all the previous night, was the realization by the right brigade (the 4th) that the tanks could not possibly reach the enemy wire before the infantry. A last-moment attempt was made to get the machines to start earlier but it was too late to alter the arrangements such as they were. The infantry, which had been lying out in the open in the falling snow since 3 a.m., was to start fifteen minutes after the tanks, which were to advance

against the enemy at 4.30 a.m. Bullecourt was drenched with gas, as it had been the previous night. In the hope of increasing the chance of surprise by the tanks, there was to be no preliminary bombardment and no creeping barrage.



#### THE BATTLE OF BULLECOURT

The tanks were again late. By the time the attack was due to start, only three out of the six allotted to the 4th Brigade were in position. The arrangements to drown the sound of the engines also broke down, and very soon after they started, the enemy who had heard their approach began to fire heavily, and flares and bursting shells revealed the Australians lying down in long perfectly dressed lines.

At the prescribed moment the 4th Brigade advanced to the assault and soon overtook the tanks, thus eliminating the possibility of their trampling down the wire as had been planned. As for the left brigade, owing to misunderstanding the stream of contradictory orders it had received, it awaited the arrival of the tanks before advancing. These were even later

than those on the right, so this brigade remained lying in the open under the German barrage long after the 4th Brigade had moved forward. It was not until after 5 a.m., when dawn was breaking and only a couple of tanks had lumbered ahead, that the left brigade advanced. The bombardment of Bullecourt had ceased, in the expectation that tanks would be in the place by then, leaving the advancing Australians at the mercy of flanking fire from the village.

The story of the infantry assault is that of very brave men who, undaunted by the fact that they were faced by wire defences only partially cut, captured their immediate objectives in face of an undisturbed and entrenched enemy, although they were deprived of the artillery support to which they were accustomed, and were without the tanks upon which they had been told to rely. As for the tanks themselves, they were gallantly led but their task was hopeless. While it was still dark their outline, it is said, could be seen by the sparks from the bullets that hit them. As soon as daylight revealed them stark and black against the white background, every German gun concentrated upon them. They resembled moles scattered on a marble slab, and one by one were put out of action. Some were burned and their crews with them. The two on the right never got as far as taking part in the action. Of the next pair, one got into the German lines and was eventually disabled, after drawing such intense fire that the trenches in its neighbourhood were untenable. The other lost direction and fought a single-handed action that ended in its catching fire after having been riddled with armour-piercing bullets.

The next two in line were those earmarked to advance along the depression between the two brigades. One had a break-down and caught fire on the way, the other reached the wire, got enmeshed in the third belt and finally caught fire also. The next in line was hit twice by shells near the starting point and the driver decapitated. As for the tanks on the 12th (left) Brigade front, they arrived late, as has been seen. Two were soon put out of action, the third destroyed a machine-gun before being itself destroyed, the fourth did good work by penetrating into Bullecourt and suppressing a machine-gun there. This tank was also eventually destroyed, but its crew escaped.

Somehow, in spite of the heaviest casualties, mostly suffered on reaching the wire, which observers described as seeming to be beset by swarms of fireflies as the German bullets hit the strands, the Australians penetrated the German front and support trenches. The right brigade gained most of its objectives in the Hindenburg Line, but was unable to advance beyond it. There was some good shooting at groups of retreating Germans. If only a barrage could have been put down on the front and flanks of the captured position all might yet have been well, in spite of the garrison's



small numbers owing to the severe casualties; but no protective shelling came down. The news at headquarters was conflicting. Some reported that the infantry were fighting in the front line, others that both infantry and tanks were beyond the Hindenburg Line. The gunners did not know where to direct their fire and were paralysed by the fear of shelling their own people.

The left brigade (12th), which was attacking with only two battalions as against the four of the 4th Brigade, not having so far to go, had been unfortunate, as has been seen, in having to lie for some time in the open exposed to the German bombardment while awaiting the tanks. When odd tanks did appear the men naturally bunched up behind them and suffered the severest losses. Here also the wire was little damaged. Nevertheless with splendid bravery, magnificently led by their officers, the Australians rushed both the first and second German trench systems.

There was a gap between the two brigades marked by a depression in the ground. Tanks, according to the plan, were to have attacked down this and, by establishing themselves in the enemy's trench system, enable the two brigades to join hands. As the tanks did not appear, contact could not be established between them.

The Command, from the brigades upwards, found it even more difficult than usual to unravel the situation and, as must always be the case in such circumstances, the responsibility of individual commanders was appalling. Decisions had to be taken with the full knowledge that any mistake must be paid for in men's lives, lives thrown down one by one or in handfuls like coins on a table in a gamble with fate while Death, grim and emotionless croupier, raked in the proceeds of every error, every miscalculation.

The first rush carried the Australians well into the Hindenburg Line. Contrary to expectations it had nothing of the ideal trench-system about it; no concrete dug-outs, no labyrinths or underground passages: in many cases the dug-outs had barely been started.

On the right some parties had attempted to push towards Riencourt, but, in the main, progress beyond the trenches was found to be impossible in the face of German machine-gun fire. Some of the enemy had bolted at first sight of the attackers, others and especially the machine-gun teams stood their ground until they were overwhelmed; but as soon as the Australian advance was brought to a halt the Germans returned to the attack. They fought like demons, the Wurtembergers showing as great a determination as the Australians. On they came, attacking our men frontally, on the outer flanks and through the gap between the two brigades.

The farther from the front the more distorted was the impression of the

real situation, so much so that the army ordered the 4th Cavalry Division forward across the Hindenburg Line in the belief that this was completely in our hands.

The Sialkot Brigade advanced and the 17th Lancers got as far as sending forward a dismounted wire-cutting party. Naturally nothing beyond casualties both to men and horses was achieved.

By 10 o'clock the position of the Australians in the German trenches upon whom ever-increasing pressure was being put, was very grave. A good many of the automatic weapons were out of action, because they had either been damaged or become unusable because water could not be brought up. The grenades and small arms ammunition of which the troops stood in such dire need were also lacking. Word had been passed down the line to send every available grenade to the hard-pressed flanks, where for some time now it had only been possible to fling back an occasional Mills bomb in answer to the swarms of egg-shaped missiles hurled by the enemy. The parapets were swept by machine-gun fire to such an extent that it was impossible to hold up a hand without standing a good chance of getting a bullet through it.

The German fire increased till it became a hurricane. German infantry crowding the windows of Riencourt took deliberate and undisturbed aim at any runner or isolated figure between the lines. A few shells would have silenced them, but our guns remained mute save for salvoes falling well behind the German lines. It was not till 11 a.m. that the true position seems to have been grasped as far back as divisional headquarters, and it was not until 11.45 a.m. that the barrage at last came down on the whole front. Belated though it was, it proved of great assistance in the latter part of the operation.

Meanwhile the Australians were being driven back from bay to bay down the trenches. Several times parties of men jumped on to the parapet hoping to shoot down the Germans who kept pressing on under cover of a hail of grenades, but these attempts met with little success and were very costly, for only a few survived the withering German fire.

Meanwhile the 62nd Division, which was to have attacked Bullecourt as soon as the four tanks appeared, had been waiting, but there was no sign of the machines. Presently a message came from the Australians that they held the place and an advance was ordered, but a later communication, which was only too true, stated that it was far from certain whether any of their men were in the village; so the British, whose patrols found the wire surrounding Bullecourt still uncut, remained in their positions, and the attack of the 62nd Division did not materialize.

It became obvious that there was no choice for those Australians who were left in the German trenches but to chance the machine-guns and run

for it. It was a costly business. Casualties were heavy amongst the survivors as they sprang from shell-hole to shell-hole in an attempt to get back. Some, finding escape impossible, had to surrender.

The 4th Division lost over 3000 officers and men, of whom over 10 were captured. Many of the prisoners were wounded. By far the heaviest casualties were suffered by the right brigade, the 4th, which lost about four-fifths of the men engaged.

The tank crews had totalled 103 officers and men. Of these fifty-two were killed, wounded or missing. It is probable that with the possible exception of the tank which penetrated the Bullecourt defences, every one of the machines had been put out of action by 7 a.m.

Such was the Battle of Bullecourt, a costly failure well calculated to lower the morale of all but the very finest troops, and certain to shake the participants' confidence in both Staffs and leadership, for the plan turned out to be as unrealizable as the arrangements were inadequate.

The gross incompetence with which the tanks were handled was a serious and unjustified set-back to the new arm, for the Australians attributed their failure largely to them, a judgment true as regards this battle, but misleading as a generalization.

*It seems well-nigh incredible that, after their failure on the 10th and the obviously serious results which followed, they should again have been allowed to be late on the 11th.* To this initial and colossal error were no doubt added others due to the inexperience of the crews, their fatigue and lack of clear instructions; but these were atoned for by bravery of a very high order. They were the targets for every hostile gun, to such an extent that their neighbourhood was an inferno from which the infantry fled; the sides of their machines were pierced by armour-piercing bullets (one had seventy such bullets in it); they knew there was ever prospect of burning like torches at any moment; yet they held on their way until their iron prisons broke down or caught fire. Of the eleven machines engaged nine received direct hits and two were missing.

The unfortunate decision not to put down a barrage which, had it opened early enough, might have enabled the captured trenches to be held, is explained by the fact that the light was extraordinarily deceptive that morning. It was very hard to tell friend from foe, distances could not be judged, and the consensus of opinion amongst observers in rear was that our troops and some tanks were far farther forward than they actually were. It was an error, but one for which no blame can be attached to those who committed it. Less excusable would seem to be the inefficiency of the counter-battery work. We now know that the Germans lost only nine gunners that day.

The Australian Official History is justifiably and comprehensibly severe in its judgment both of the plan and of the Army Commander. After



admitting a number of errors in execution, it states: 'Gough's general conception of assisting the Third Army by a stroke at the enemy's exposed flank and rear was indeed sound, provided a practicable means of delivering that stroke could be discovered. But with almost boyish eagerness to deliver a death blow, the Army Commander broke at every stage through rules recognized even by platoon commanders'.

General Gough's fate was a strange one. In 1917 his errors were very great, yet he retained his command. In 1918 he showed fine leadership, but lost his post.

A study of Bullecourt makes dismal reading to the professional soldier trained to avoid the mistakes that were committed with such flagrant irresponsibility, but in compensation pride swells in the breast of anyone belonging to the British race as he evokes the picture of those men who, without artillery support, with the tanks they had been told to rely upon to clear the way for them either broken down or left behind, crossed two formidable belts of practically uncut wire in the face of a brave and determined enemy strongly entrenched, and beat them, only to be driven back in the end owing to lack of ammunition and support.

Bullecourt will in time conjure up not so much the story of a frightful mistake as one of infinite courage, the magnificent courage of the Australians who proved their staunchness in defeat to be of even finer quality than their dashing gallantry in victory.

§ 12 (P. 431)

*April 13th.*

The 9th Division, now in reserve, was ordered to advance through the 4th and capture Rocux on the Scarpe and the ground north of it.

The order for the attack only reached the brigades during the night of the 11th. The time available to prepare the advance on what were now organized positions was totally inadequate. The artillery was badly handicapped, since it had only the morning in which to reconnoitre the enemy's positions.

Higher authority had suggested that the best place to form up the infantry was in the valley of Fampoux; but it was found, as could easily have been ascertained by any staff officer, that it was under the direct observation of the Chemical Works that were to become so notorious later. The South Africans had no choice but to assemble in the village of Fampoux, which was a shell-trap, while the next brigade to the north had to start from the old German line, which entailed advancing down a slope and covering 1700 yards in full view of the enemy. It was essential that a smoke screen should be put down, but there was no time to do so. Divisional headquarters was far behind at Etrun, three miles west of Arras. It only moved to St. Nicholas, level with Arras, that day. The heavy guns

which were to have smashed the Chemical Works and the buildings about the station failed to do so. From the infantry point of view the heavies might just as well have remained silent. At no time during the day did our shelling assume the proportions of a bombardment, nor was our counter-battery work effective. No apparent attempt was made to deal with hostile machine-gun posts.

Just before the attack an air pilot discovered that the enemy had dug a line west of the Roeux-Gavrelle road. It was then too late to alter the line on which our barrage was to fall, with the result that when it came down it did so well beyond these trenches, leaving the garrison free to fire to their heart's content at the magnificent target our attacking troops afforded. The South Africans had suffered heavily while assembling in Fampoux, but this did not prevent their dashing forward in magnificent style when the signal was given. As soon, however, as the men appeared beyond the shelter of the houses, they were met by a withering fire, yet this did not stop them; on they went, gaining some two hundred yards, but farther they could not advance.

The infantry attacking north of the village on the left of the South Africans displayed magnificent coolness. They had to form up and advance over one thousand yards in the open under the eyes of the Germans before reaching the line held by the 4th Division. This they did, crossing the enemy barrage and arriving level with the 4th Division just before zero hour (5 p.m.). Our barrage then opened and was excellent, though unfortunately for the reason just given it fell behind the German line. The enemy, undisturbed and unmolested, was able to pour a deadly aimed fire at our men as soon as they attempted to advance farther. The only result of the operation was heavy loss and the temporary dashing of the superb confidence of those men who on the 9th had felt they had definitely established their superiority over the enemy.

### § 13 (P. 431)

*April 14th.*

On the 14th, in conformity with the decision to progress only by a series of minor operations, the 29th Division, which had relieved the 3rd during the night of the 13th-14th, attempted to advance east of Wancourt in the early morning; but after gaining some ground it was driven back to its assembly trenches by a strong German counter-attack. The fire from enemy guns north of the Scarpe inflicted severe casualties on our troops engaged in this operation.

Two companies of Newfoundland Infantry greatly distinguished themselves in a local attack east of Monchy. Rushing forward they met with unexpected success, reaching the Bois du Sart, about two thousand yards east of Monchy. There they ran into a large body of German infantry

assembling to attack the place. A desperate struggle ensued. One of our planes flying low came back with the amazing story that he had seen heavy fighting near the wood. Everybody was puzzled by this extraordinary tale of a battle so far behind the enemy's lines. Nobody knew where the Newfoundlanders were; lost in the smoke they had pressed forward unobserved. On a battlefield capable of swallowing whole battalions they had not been missed. It was not till next day, when the sole survivor of these two companies was questioned, that the story was elucidated.

The gallant effort of the Newfoundlanders did not prevent the enemy launching the attack he had planned to recapture Monchy, but the three brigades which took part in it failed to gain ground. Our losses in this sector were about 1300, and we estimated those of the enemy at about 2500.

So ended yet another day of heavy and unsatisfactory fighting, exposing once again the folly of piecemeal attacks on narrow fronts, which even if successful could only have resulted in the creation of dangerous salients.

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